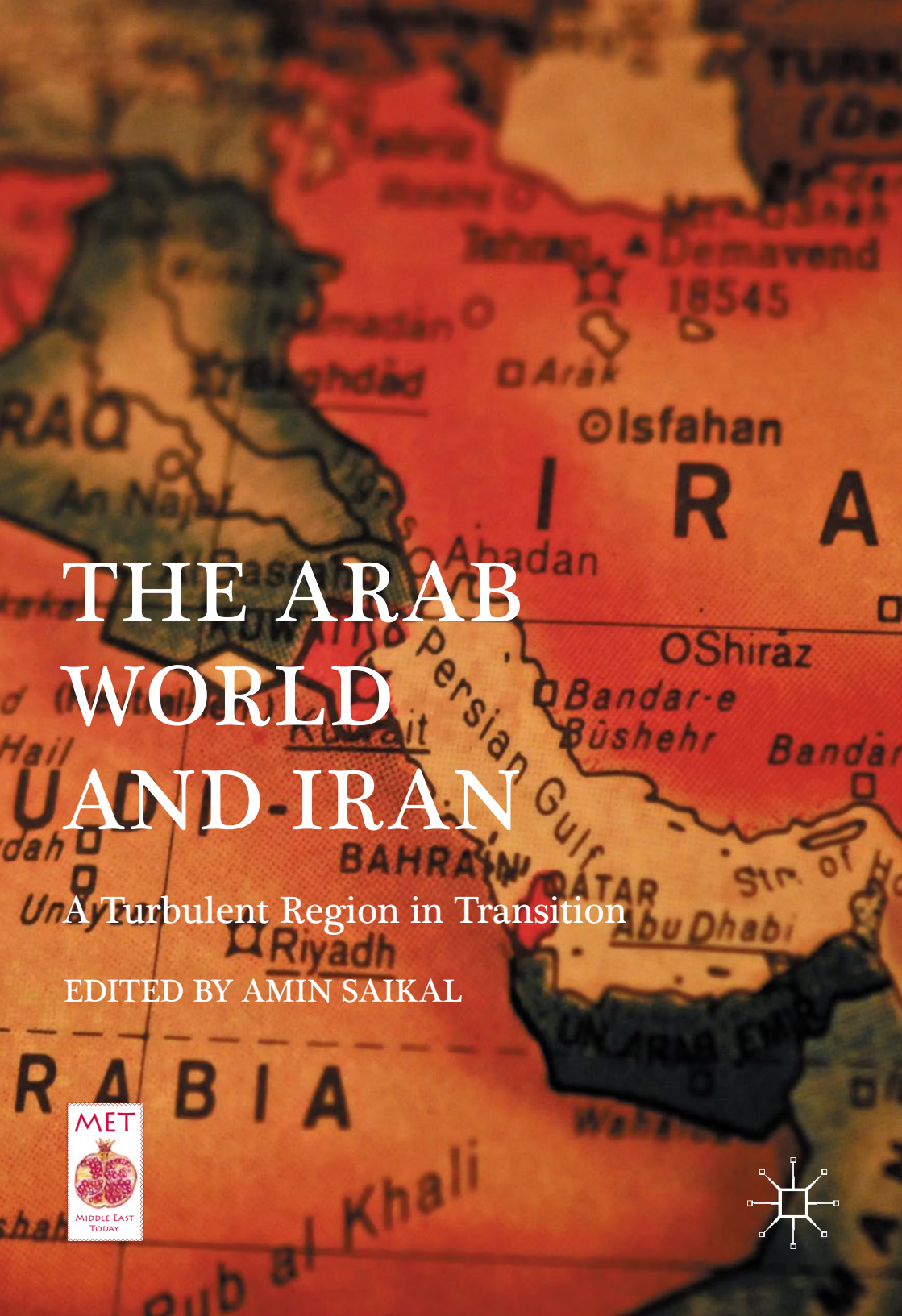




THE ARAB WORLD AND IRAN

A Turbulent Region in Transition

EDITED BY AMIN SAIKAL



Middle East Today

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Edited by Amin Saikal

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FOREWORD

The Hon. Julie Bishop, Foreign Minister of Australia

I was delighted to speak at the opening of the conference on the Arab World, Iran and the Major Powers: Transitions and Challenges, on 26 June 2014.

The Middle East is a rich and wonderfully diverse part of the world. The region is growing, with a middle class predicted to rise to over 234 million by 2030. Australia and the Middle East have very strong cultural and economic links and it is my hope to see those links strengthen further over the years ahead. There is also no doubt that the region faces serious security challenges, especially in Iraq and Syria.

The conference attracted a number of respected scholars, including Australian experts. This collection of papers will be a valuable resource for academics and policymakers. The conference also marked the twentieth anniversary of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, which has played a leading role in academic and public policy debate about Australia's engagement with the Middle East and Central Asia.

I particularly acknowledge the work of Professor Amin Saikal, the Centre's Director. An expert in the politics, history, and international relations of the Middle East and Central Asia, and the role of Islam in these regions, Professor Saikal is one of Australia's most distinguished academics, a well-known public commentator, and a prolific author. The Centre has been at the forefront of research, teaching, and policy on Arab and Islamic issues in Australia and internationally, under Professor Saikal's leadership.

One of the Centre's valuable functions has been the cross-fertilization of ideas between government and academia, which has informed Australia's foreign policy and our international relations. Through the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the government looks forward to continuing its collegial relationship with the Centre for many years to come.

PREFACE

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is in the throes of major geopolitical transitions and resistance to them at sub-national, national, and regional levels. The region has never experienced as much volatility and uncertainty for almost a century. The “Arab Spring” or popular uprisings which, from late 2010, came to sweep several parts of the region and on which its instigators had pinned their hopes for pro-democratic transformation of their societies has given way to the region becoming an arena of conflicts within conflicts. Only Tunisia has managed to embrace political reform in response to popular demands. Other Arab countries, which were directly or indirectly subject to a popular cry for change in pursuit of political freedoms and improved conditions of living, are now either in the grip of bloody power struggles or once again under authoritarian rule. These developments, together with rivalries between the main regional players, more importantly, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as well as interference by the extra regional actors, more specifically, the USA and Russia (although China has played its role), have generated the necessary conditions for extremist sub-national and trans-national religious groups to pose serious challenges to the countries in the region and beyond. Not only have the geopolitical contours of Iraq and Syria already changed and Libya and Yemen have lost their status as functioning states, but also the current trends have the potential for even wider geopolitical alterations. There is not a single regional or international power now capable of taking the lead to bring stability and security to the MENA region and to end the region’s vulnerability to extremism, wider bloodshed, and humanitarian tragedies.

This book is designed to assess the key variables that have contributed to where the MENA region is placed today and to address the painful issues, developments, and challenges of transition that have come to confront the region and, for that matter, the world, especially the West. I owe thanks to many individuals and institutions for bringing this volume to fruition. First of all, I am deeply grateful to the Australian Foreign Minister, The Hon. Julie Bishop, and her Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, for supporting our endeavor and funding the project. I am also thankful to Adel Abdul Ghafar of the Australian National University for his editorial assistance in the early stages of the volume and to Julie Trehu of Princeton University for her very valuable help during the later and crucial phase of the book's editorial work. Further, I am indebted to Ms Pamela Lourandos, the administrator at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (the Middle East and Central Asia) at the Australian National University for keeping me on my toes whilst I was editing the volume during my leave at the Lichtenstein Institute on Self-Determination (LISD), Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University. In connection with the latter, I cannot praise enough the LISD's Director, Professor Wolfgang Danspeckguber, for his warm intellectual and personal friendship, as well as his professional staff, Trisha Barney and Angella Matheney.

Last but not the least, I owe everything I do to my selfless and loving partner and critic, Mary-Louise Hickey, without whose support I would be so much the poorer.

Canberra, Australia

Amin Saikal

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ABBREVIATIONS

AKP	Justice and Development Party
ANDSF	Afghan National Defence and Security Forces
AST	Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia
BSA	Bilateral Security Agreement
CENTCOM	Central Command
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross domestic product
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp
IS	Islamic State
ISAF	International Security Assistance Forces
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
RSM	Resolute Support Mission
RST	Rentier state theory
SOFA	Status of Forces Agreement
SWF	Sovereign wealth fund
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UGTT	Greater Union of Tunisian Workers
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

The Middle East and North Africa: An Arena of Change and Transition?

Amin Saikal

The oil-rich but volatile Muslim Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is in the grip of multiple humanitarian and geopolitical crises and balance of power shifts, perhaps not seen since the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the British-French colonial remapping of the region nearly a century ago. The old correlation of forces in support of maintaining the status quo, especially following the Iranian revolution more than 36 years ago, is altering. A set of new alignments and realignments along multiple overlapping and contested regional fault lines, including sectarian divisions and geopolitical rivalries at different levels, has come to redefine the region. Its traditional political and territorial contours are at serious risk of changing.

The so-called Arab Spring or popular uprisings that commenced in late 2010 has been transformed into a winter of despair and soul searching for those pro-democracy and liberalist elements that spearheaded them. Initially, it resulted in the toppling of dictatorial leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, sparked bloody conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, and threatened the interests of conservative Arab states, led by the Sunni Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. However, of all these countries, only Tunisia has managed to develop a pathway toward a democratic future, and even that trajectory faces serious challenges. Egypt has returned to authoritarian rule at the expense of overthrowing its democratically elected Islamist Muslim Brotherhood government in mid-2013 and outlawing the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, with Saudi Arabia and its partners

in the Gulf Cooperation Council being supportive, and the West, more importantly, the USA, acquiescent in the process. The other Arab states subjected to popular uprisings (perhaps with the exception of Bahrain), plus Iraq, have virtually disintegrated.

If the objective of the Western-backed conservative Arab actors was to marginalize and possibly eliminate the forces of radical political Islam, this has not been achieved. Political suppression, human rights violations, social and economic disparities and injustices, and active conflicts, as well as Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands, with East Jerusalem as the third holiest site for Muslims, and America's support of Israel and authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, have continued to stimulate radical groups opposed to those regimes and determined to pursue their goals through violence.

An important example of such a group came with the rise of the extremist Sunni Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Its conquest of vast swathes of Iraqi and Syrian territories since mid-2014 has introduced a new dimension to the Middle East. The group's declaration of a *khilafat* or "Islamic State" (IS) has fatally fractured an already politically and territorially conflict-ridden Iraq and Syria. IS's radical Wahabi/Salafi-rooted ideological disposition, with a call to Muslims around the world to join it in a mission to recreate an Arab-led Islamic empire along the lines of that of the seventh to thirteenth centuries, has posed a serious challenge, not only to Iraq's and Syria's neighboring states, but also to the West.

The USA and many of its allies were initially caught off-guard by IS's successes. The shock was especially painful when considered in the light of the staggering amount of blood and money that the USA had invested in Iraq for 9 years following its 2003 invasion of the country in order to transform Iraq into a stable, secure, and democratic state. The USA had fought a trillion-dollar war (as part of a wider "war on terror," commencing in October 2001 with its intervention in Afghanistan to punish Al Qaeda for its terrorist attacks on America and the organization's Taliban allies) in the country. It lost some 4000 troops with many more thousands injured, not to mention the incalculable Iraqi human and material losses. Under the presidency of George W. Bush, its avowed goal was to change Iraq into a stable democracy and to advance a process of democratization across the rest of the Muslim Middle East. In the process, Washington also aimed at squeezing the Iranian Islamic regime and its Syrian and Lebanese allies as America's main adversarial forces, and conversely at strengthening the position of its strategic partner, Israel, and cementing the USA's geopolitical dominance in the region.

However, more than a decade later, the reverse of what Washington intended has come to beset the Middle East. Iraq has fallen apart, and the Arab world has remained mostly autocratic with deeply rooted seeds of long-term structural instability. The country that has emerged as the most stable constituent state is the Shi'a-dominated and non-Arab Islamic Republic of Iran. It has largely deflected the turmoil of the Arab domain and has emerged as a dominant player in the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts, while also building strong leverages of influence in Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen, and Palestine, not to mention Afghanistan, within the parameters of the "Greater Middle East." This does not mean that Iran is not involved in the regional conflicts and tensions. To the contrary, it has been an integral part of the region's turbulent transition, especially in the context of its proxy sectarian and geopolitical confrontations with Saudi Arabia as well as rivalry with Israel. At the same time, ironically, Iran is also the country whose interests have increasingly come to converge with those of the USA and its Western allies against IS as an anti-Shi'a and anti-Iranian force. Boosting this convergence is the comprehensive agreement, which Iran signed on July 14, 2015, with the USA and the four other permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany, (the Group of 5 + 1) to resolve the long-standing dispute over the country's nuclear program.

If the nuclear deal is implemented in good faith, and the historical antipathy between Tehran and Washington were to give way to a more interest-based, albeit adversarial, relationship between the two countries, it has the potential to pave the way for a degree of US-Iranian cooperation in addressing some regional conflicts in the foreseeable future. A fear of this development, together with the lifting of the crippling US-led and UN economic and financial sanctions against Iran that could make the country stronger and more influential in return for curbing Tehran's possible ambitions to acquire nuclear weapons, has not only profoundly worried Israel, but has also seriously concerned Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies who share a somewhat common position with Israel on that score. Whereas Israel has lobbied vehemently to scuffle any process of normalization of relations between the USA and Iran, Saudi-led Arab states have engaged in active interventionist policies to counter a perceived Iranian threat. Hence, we have witnessed the Saudi-led interventions in Bahrain in support of the minority Sunni Arab monarchy against its Iranian-linked Shi'a majority population, and in Yemen to counter the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, and the backing of anti-Iranian Sunni groups in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. In this context, Gulf Cooperation Council member

countries, dominated by Saudi Arabia, have also found it expedient to make little more than symbolic contributions to the US-led military campaign against IS, despite public condemnation of the entity as a terrorist and unacceptable phenomenon. Just as Iran has come to the conclusion, that it is important to work pragmatically for an improvement of its relations with the USA, Saudi Arabia has engaged in intense political and strategic maneuvering to shore up its position against a US-Iranian entente and cooperation in the region. While retaining its *de facto* alliance with the USA as the bedrock of its security, it has lately doubled its efforts to build a region-wide network of Sunni forces, deepen strategic ties with a nuclear-armed Pakistan, widen relations with Western countries other than the USA, and strengthen ties with Russia and China, in particular.

The MENA region, in general, and its sub-region of the Gulf in particular, has indeed entered a very turbulent, transformative phase, pregnant with serious political, social, economic, and strategic possibilities. The prevailing regional status quo has become increasingly unsustainable. The diffusion of the “Arab Spring,” the reaction of the conservative forces seeking to maintain traditional authoritarianism in the face of demands for change, the rise of extremist groups, most importantly IS, the Iraqi and Syrian crises, the Saudi-Iranian rivalries, and the inability of the USA to play a determining role in regard to any of these developments have come together to profoundly affect the prospective regional landscape. The regional geopolitical contours of the post-Cold War era are at risk of substantially altering, and the conflicting forces and interests at work are eating the heart out of any effort to stabilize the region or to make it a lesser source of anxiety and concern in world politics. The region has become an arena of conflicts within conflicts with a circular trajectory.

The conclusion of Iran’s nuclear agreement, though a positive development, is unlikely to produce fruitful results for regional cooperation in the short run. Most indicators point to the possibility in store of a more fundamental political and strategic remapping of the Middle East amidst the weakening of sovereignty on the part of some existing Arab states, even while others seek to manage change and bring stability to the region. Unpacking and understanding the complexities of the issues involved is by no means easy. It requires tackling the most salient features that have plunged the MENA region into a crisis of change and transitions.

This book—a compilation of contributions by a number of well-placed specialists—focuses primarily on interpreting the changing domestic and regional dynamics in the Arab world and Iran. In so doing, it capitalizes

on intensified public and academic interest in the MENA region. While there is a growing body of literature of scholarship and research on particular aspects of transition in the region, there is a dearth of volume that incorporates both local and regional processes of change within the context of the Arab world and Iran. The book engages with the literature on a number of topics such as processes of democratization, sectarianism, political Islam, and Arab-Iranian geostrategic rivalry.

This book's main objective is to provide a fresh interpretation of the changing dynamics in the Arab world and Iran. It seeks to unpack the complexities of the disputes, conflicts, rivalries, and failed aspirational goals and processes of change and development that have made the Muslim Middle East so turbulent, directionless, and perpetually contested by both regional and international actors. The volume is organized into three thematic sections, each of which addresses important questions about change in the MENA region. The chapters deal with different national, regional, and extra-regional factors and actors that inform, affect, and shape the Arab world, Iran's policy behavior, and Arab-Iranian relations. In the process, they provide the necessary explanatory foundations for assessing the future of the MENA region in the medium to long run.

The first section covers different aspects and dynamics of change in the Arab world and assesses the prospects and challenges of transition. It addresses such questions as have the traditional power structures been seriously threatened or have elites managed to resist any real change? What are the prospects of democratization and the pursuit of progressive social, economic, and political reforms after the "Arab Spring?" What are the implications of the ongoing transitions for Western policymakers? Fethi Mansouri, Bob Bowker, and Matthew Gray contribute to both popular and academic debates over how we should interpret transitional and civilizational challenges within the Arab world and what its implications may be for political, social, and economic developments in the region.

The second section examines the role of Islam, Islamism, Islamic governance, and sectarian and ethnic politics in the region. How have Islamists in power fared? What is the impact of sectarian and ethnic politics in the Syrian conflict? What is the role of the Saudi religious establishment in the conflict? As elaborated by Hisham Hellyer, Raihan Ismail, and Minerva Nasser-Eddine, a multifaceted examination of the role of Islam and its potential relationship to democratic change can provide insight into the transitions and challenges facing the broader Arab world, Iran, and the major powers with an interest in the region.

The third section of the volume focuses on Iranian domestic and regional politics. Building on the previous section, Shahram Akbarzadeh, Bruce Koepke, and Amin Saikal address the following questions: what are the Iranian foreign policy objectives in Syria? What is Iran's policy attitude toward its important but war-torn neighbor, Afghanistan, and can it play a stabilizing role in that country? What are the prospects of change in the Middle East within the context of Saudi-Iranian geostrategic rivalries? How does Iran project its power in neighboring countries? How are Saudi-Iranian proxy conflicts shaping the region, especially in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, where such rivalry has extended to supporting national or sub-national groups in opposition to one another?

The final chapter draws together the main findings of the volume in ways which not only inform us about the overall prevailing regional situation, but also enable the readers to draw their own conclusions as to where the Middle East is heading.

PART I

The Arab World: Prospects and
Challenges in Transition

Prospects for Democratization in the Middle East Post-Arab Spring

Fethi Mansouri

INTRODUCTION

The immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring witnessed the ushering in of a new set of dynamics with the promise of more freedom, economic prosperity, dignity, and democracy. Some early analyses portray the Arab Spring as a critical and significant challenge to the status quo, even for countries in which old regimes were not toppled nor critically threatened. These views draw from a previously held assumption of the Arab world's "democratic deficit"; that is, an understanding that the region was unable to undertake political transformations akin to the successive waves of democratization seen in South America, Eastern Europe, and in some sub-Saharan African states. Indeed, the so-called "Arab exceptionalism," in relation to what Samuel Huntington has defined as the "third wave of democratization,"¹ is reinforced by an historical absence of genuine democratic governance in any of the Arab countries since independence.² The endurance of Arab authoritarianism in the face of various global democratization waves has been explained by citing the minimal reforms undertaken by ruling autocrats to stifle and circumvent democratic movements. Heydemann describes this pre-emptive phenomenon:

Authoritarian upgrading consists, in other words, not in shutting down and closing off Arab societies from globalization and other forces of political, economic, and social change. Nor is it based simply on the willingness of Arab governments to repress their opponents. Instead, authoritarian upgrading

involves reconfiguring authoritarian governance to accommodate and manage changing political, economic, and social conditions. It originated in no small part as a defensive response to challenges confronting Arab autocrats during the past two decades.³

Despite these tactful “authoritarian upgrading[s],” there is no doubt that “the Arab Spring [has been] a popular quest for freedom in all of its manifestations.”⁴ This quest for freedom is also an indication of a crisis of legitimacy of the dominant political systems in place since national independence, established mostly by military officers and their families and labeled by some analysts as a form of “neo-Mamluk rule.”⁵ The entrenchment of neo-Mamluk rule still represents the biggest challenge for post-revolution consolidation and political reform across the region.

Against this background, this chapter reflects on some key interconnected issues pertaining to democratic transition in the Arab world. In particular, it focuses on an exploration of the root causes of the Arab Spring and the differing trajectories the Arab states affected have taken. The chapter then undertakes an analysis of the Tunisian experience; its path from revolutionary fervor to political transition, and an assessment of the challenges for post-revolution consolidation.

THE ERUPTION OF THE ARAB SPRING: AN EXPLORATION OF THE ROOT CAUSES

Because of its sudden nature and significant implications for the region and beyond, the Arab Spring has been the focus of, and will continue to attract, a great deal of political and scholarly attention.⁶ The fact that the Arab region was governed autocratically in the immediate post-decolonization period is not a major surprise, but the persistence of this undemocratic form of governance, despite democratization waves elsewhere, is rather exceptional.

Following the overthrow of Tunisia’s autocratic ruler Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011, uprisings swept quickly through neighboring countries including Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and Libya. The rapid transmission occurred not only geographically but also across social strata. The social, economic, and political crises, which kindled the Arab Spring,⁷ included most notably high rates of unemployment, political repression, and the paralysis of state institutions, as well as corruption, divisions, and disloyalty within military institutions (in particular in countries where the military had a dominant political and economic role).

In analyzing these momentous political events sweeping the region, this chapter does not offer a definitive account of the Arab Spring, nor can it claim any predictive power, since the ongoing events associated with the Arab Spring are driven by a multitude of complex factors and the “processes of change in the region have often been subtle and gradual, with pressure mounting until the point of where new forms of politics suddenly became possible.”⁸ Any attempts to establish neat causality will be inadequately faced with the importance of “micro- and meso-level transitions—that is gradual, interrelated changes in political, economic and social spheres that, like slowly moving tectonic plates, eventually create the conditions conducive to earth-shattering events.”⁹ Upheavals associated with political transformations are inherently fluid, unpredictable, and therefore not easily “theorizable.”

This chapter discusses briefly these and other significant issues from political, social, and economic perspectives, inquiring into whether common structural problems did indeed characterize the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in the lead up to the Arab Spring. More importantly, the chapter examines whether such structural deficiencies play a significant role in shaping and even predicting the prospects for genuine progress toward democratization and sociopolitical stability.

The Failure of the “Rentierism” Approach

The Arab Spring erupted because of the cumulative failures of successive economic policies, and not just because of a lack of political reforms. In classical Islamic thought, justice is always privileged over all other sociopolitical considerations including democracy (the importance of the notion of the “just ruler” is highlighted in the classical Islamic scholarship of *Ibn Khaldun*, *Ibn Taymiyyah*, and others). Any serious analysis of the current political upheavals across the region must therefore account for the underlying social and economic failures. Indeed, the Arab world has seen a long-standing paralysis of government institutions to meet social needs, provide safety nets for the poor, and undertake serious efforts toward redistribution of wealth.

In terms of the major macroeconomic options pursued by post-colonial autocratic regimes across the region, the adoption of what has become known as the “Washington model” in the Arab region led to a modernizing of poverty rather than a modernizing of national economies. This is best illustrated by the gradual retreat of the Arab state’s role in alleviating

poverty, reflecting the neoliberal assumption that the private sector would fill the gap through investment and job creation. Yet, this private sector intervention did not occur at the required level. The official discourse of addressing poverty thus became about minimizing the effects of unemployment through the administration of what can be termed limited and ineffective “pain relief” measures (and even in this regard not all states were able to pursue such band-aid approaches). But as extensive studies elsewhere have shown,¹⁰ the only effective and durable solution for poverty reduction is economic growth and job creation. There has never been an emphasis in the MENA region on full employment as an effective path toward fighting poverty and social inequality, as has been the case in many East Asian countries.

Historically, job creation has been sustained through industrialization, as history shows in the context of Western and, more recently, some Asian economies (witness, e.g., the so-called late industrialization in the cases of South Korea and China). Industrialization efforts have never been widely undertaken in the Arab world. Furthermore, many Arab countries exhibit a lack of familiarity with, or interest in, Asian experiences; the dominant model they are exposed to is neoliberalism as exemplified by the USA. Part of the problem with neoliberal policies is not so much the ideological flaws, although that may be the case in certain areas, but rather an incompatibility with the socioeconomic realities of the Arab world. For example, the insistence on wage flexibility as a way of maintaining sector viability and labor market participation is very problematic in the context of Arab countries, where it actually leads to deeper entrenchment of poverty in rural regions and generally among lower socioeconomic classes.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the rural population represented about 41% of the total population of Arab countries in 2005, and the majority of these citizens (94%) were categorized among the low to lower medium income groups.¹¹ In this context, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has played a key role in enabling the poorest rural communities to attempt to overcome poverty and unemployment.

As stated in a recent study by IFAD, the general high rate of unemployment represents one of the most pressing challenges in the region, particularly among young people.¹² Furthermore, the International Labor Organization stated that high unemployment rates were affected by the global financial crisis, which erupted in 2008 in the financial systems of

developed countries.¹³ The global financial crisis accentuated youth unemployment, which was estimated at 24.8% in 2010, escalating to 33.3% among young Arab women. At the same time, wages have remained stagnant with an average income among rural population of around US\$350 per year and with more than 21% overall living on less than US\$2 per day.¹⁴ There is also the problem of the distorted economic development approach, characterized by indices such as the low percentage of female work participation in relation to the total population: 45% in the Arab world as opposed to more than 60%, globally.¹⁵

More critical, perhaps, is the significant vulnerability of Arab economies to international economic fluctuations given their compositions; for example, they are particularly exposed to volatile commodity markets, most significantly oil, and global economic conditions, which impact tourism. This means that most Arab countries, irrespective of their wealth, resources, and geography, are still very much dependent on external influences for their domestic livelihoods including regional inter-dependency. This inter-regional dependency problem has been accentuated by the fact that the direction of domestic investment has been predominantly in non-productive sectors, such as real estate or hospitality, as opposed to industry or agriculture.

This situation means that science and technology and more general research and development are not well supported. In fact, less than 0.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) is used for research and development, as compared to 1.5 to 2% in industrial countries which, when combined with the lack of any innovation agenda in the Arab world, creates a significant knowledge gap in relation to regional and international competitors.¹⁶ Any current engagement with a genuine democratization process in Arab Spring countries therefore requires a systematic examination of successive failures pertaining to the politics of economic development.

In short, the failure to undertake meaningful economic development and the lack of any kind of political reform meant that on the eve of the Arab Spring many authoritarian regimes of the Arab world no longer held any kind of legitimacy. The social contract that regulated the relationship between these Arab regimes and their people had rested for decades on the implicit exchange of a minimum standard of living for some degree of loyalty to the regime.¹⁷ As the state proved increasingly unable to guarantee this minimum safety, the various regimes across the region were increasingly exposed to the risks of a growing legitimacy deficit, culminating in the events of 2011.

DIFFERING OUTCOMES ON THE POLITICAL TRANSITION PATH

Despite these apparent common root causes, in particular from the point of view of political economy, the Arab countries are by no means similar in terms of social and political development during the post-colonial decades. As Rex Brynen et al., explain:

There was or is [no] single Arab authoritarianism; rather, there is an array of political settings with histories, structural conditions, and dynamics that share both similar and strikingly dissimilar characteristics. The politics of Ben Ali's Tunisia were very different from those of Saleh's Yemen or the Khalifa monarchy in Bahrain, and nothing anywhere quite resembled Qaddafi's Libya. The dynamics of opposition and protest in those countries, although linked, have also been quite different.¹⁸

The post-revolution trajectories of the Arab Spring states developed differently in each of the countries involved. For example, some uprisings quickly toppled dictatorial regimes, as in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, while others, like in Syria and Libya, face more protracted resistance. This can be explained from a Gramscian viewpoint in terms of the strength of pre-existing civil society, by which "the more cohesive and integrated the civil society, and the more fragile or delegitimized the state, the greater the likelihood of revolutionary success (at least during the first stage of the revolution)."¹⁹ That is, the success of a revolutionary movement to arise with significant swiftness to topple an established regime can be dependent on society-specific characteristics for its capacity to build a post-revolution consensus during the transition phase.

Compounding the general challenges faced by Arab states, each state has its own ethnic, tribal, religious/sectarian, and political dynamics, all of which are factors that can influence the outcome of the transition process. In analyzing how these specific conditions create different consequences across the stages of a revolution, Arab regimes can generally be classified into three different types:

Homogeneous initiators (the states that trigger revolutionary contagions); divided authoritarian states (those that follow the initiators and that experience prolonged violence); and divided wealthy monarchical regimes (which may be able to avoid, or at least forestall, revolution).²⁰

Tunisia is relatively homogeneous with regard to national identity, tribal, and religious groups within its respective society. To a large extent, this homogeneity and cohesion facilitated and enabled the creation of a united mass movement against the fragile regime. Homogeneity, under these circumstances, facilitated “efforts by revolutionary movements to create a unifying collective ideology.”²¹ In contrast, socioculturally heterogeneous and, to a degree, divided authoritarian states, such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, saw their uprisings launch at a slower pace and face greater resistance. These societies are often split along sectarian or tribal lines that also overlap with socioeconomic stratifications. Sustaining revolutionary movements in such societies is difficult as challenges to ruling authorities may degenerate into sectarian power struggles or even outright civil war—as in the case of Syria—or a state of lawlessness and civil chaos driven by ethnic or tribal groups—as is the case with Libya.

Ethnic, religious, and tribal heterogeneity in the context of revolutionary moments therefore have the potential to impede efforts toward developing the type of unified post-revolutionary processes that can sustain and secure the consolidation stage. These country-specific sociocultural characteristics, along with other variables—most notably, strength of civil society and involvement of the military in domestic politics—are also important in shaping the consolidation stage, with a significant level of variation observed across the region. In Tunisia, for example, human capital and civil society are generally more developed than in Egypt, facilitating more opportunities for post-revolutionary political transition and security stabilization and, consequently, creating a stronger basis for consolidating early revolutionary achievements. On the other hand, Egypt’s military institution has been far more powerful and influential than either its civil society organizations or the corresponding military institution in Tunisia. As a result, the Egyptian post-revolution transitional course has been characterized by a deep ideological power struggle between the military and the Islamists, culminating in the events of June 30, 2013, and the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood’s elected president, Mohamed Morsi. While similar underlying conditions led to the uprisings and rapid toppling of the autocratic regimes in both Tunisia and Egypt (indeed the same revolutionary slogans were used across the two North African countries), the consolidation phase has highlighted the primacy of country-specificity, particularly in relation to key national institutions, resulting in different management strategies, divergent revolutionary outcomes, and possibly different prospects for revolutionary consolidation and democratic transition.²²

FROM REVOLUTIONARY FERVOR TO POLITICAL TRANSITION: THE CASE OF TUNISIA

Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, has so far become the first Arab country to succeed in making significant progress toward political reform and democratic transition. It has managed to draft and adopt a progressive new constitution and install a non-partisan government of technocrats to prepare and oversee the next round of parliamentary and presidential elections. In general, the transition toward stable democratic governance is characterized by three key stages: a breakdown of authoritarianism; a transition phase; and then the onset of a democratization process, which is supposed to produce “democratic rule.”²³ Even in the best of circumstances, however, “the path to reform is rocky, as ideological preferences and contradictory interests clash at every decision.”²⁴

Social scientists often assume that it is possible to analyze, understand, and in some cases even determine the causal factors behind important social and political phenomena. Indeed, in the context of the contemporary Arab world, there has been a tendency in social sciences to apply an almost pre-imposed “deterministic approach” that ignores the “potential of non-Islamist civic movements in the region...and even the idea that actors in the Middle East have choices.”²⁵

In the case of Tunisia, and in addition to its unique sociodemographic attributes, some of the critical factors that led to the relative success of its revolutionary consolidation and transition phase include the strength of its civil society and its contribution to the political transition at various stages of the revolution; the limited role of the military; and the nature of the main Islamist party as exemplified in its post-electoral strategic political alliance with secular leftist parties (to form the Troika government). It is these conditions that saw many analysts declare Tunisia as the Arab country most likely to achieve genuine democratization.²⁶

The Strength of Civil Society Organizations and Their Critical Role in the Revolution

Tunisia has a sizable and relatively well-educated middle class with a history of encouraging and supporting women’s socioeconomic rights since the early days of independence in 1956 (through the socially progressive Personal Status Code). Even well before its independence, Tunisia had a strong trade union movement that eventually played a significant role in the independence struggle as well in post-independence nation building.

In comparison to other Arab countries, Tunisia “has had relatively well-developed civil society structures for a long time; the labor movement, strongly represented by the country’s labor union umbrella organization, the Tunisian General Labor Union,” is well established.²⁷ In the period from 1988 to 2009, the number of civil society organizations increased from nearly 2,000 to over 9,000.²⁸ In particular, “women’s organizations have long been very active and well organized.”²⁹ The vibrancy, resilience, and reach of Tunisia’s civil society organizations proved critical in the toppling of the Ben Ali regime, as well as in the post-revolution transitional phase. But how did Tunisia’s civil society organizations oust an authoritarian regime, adapt to revolutionary changes, and remain unstifled in the midst of transition?³⁰

With regard to ousting the regime, Shelley Deane argues that Tunisia’s civil society organizations were able to mobilize activists collectively and create internal bonding between various groups and actors. This “spirit of solidarity” not only sustained the revolutionary drive, but also shaped the post-revolution institutional reform of freedom of association and civil society activity.³¹

In terms of adapting to change, Tunisia’s civil society organizations and, in particular, the new networks of associations developed during the transition phase, negotiated and achieved significant institutional reform guaranteeing the constitutional right of association and assembly for groups and citizens alike.³² Indeed, on paper, Tunisia’s new laws of association are a veritable to-do list for civil society organizations reform. Under the new laws, these organizations are encouraged to testify, comment on, and influence pending government policy and legislation. New religious and politically driven actors are emerging to challenge the existing transition coalition.³³

Tunisian civil society organization’s most critical contribution has been manifested in ensuring the so-called “twin tolerations” of religious groups and secular individuals by the state. This objective, however, has been disturbed by spikes in political violence and terrorist acts perpetuated by extreme jihadists with links to external al-Qaeda affiliated organizations. More important, though, have been Tunisia’s civil society organization’s critical role in mediating political crises during the transition phase, in particular the role played by the trade unions in organizing and presiding over the ultimately successful national dialogue. The main Tunisian union, (the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT)), has historically played a pivotal role in the independence struggle and stood up for workers’ rights even during the autocratic rule of Ben Ali.³⁴ Since the demise of the

dictatorship, the UGTT, with the support of the Tunisian League for Human Rights, the Lawyers Union, and the Doctors Union, has emerged as a key national player in the transition phase, mediating between various political protagonists and brokering several rounds of national dialogue that ultimately mitigated political crises. This was especially the case following the assassinations of leading politicians from leftist secular opposition parties, Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi.³⁵ This constructive leadership role performed by UGTT and other civil society organizations contributed to post-revolution consolidation and was sustained by an historical legacy of industrial militancy and grassroots organizational strength.

The New Constitution, Electoral Commission, and Transitional Justice Initiatives

Issues pertaining to transitional justice have proved to be the most challenging for successive governments since the overthrow of the autocratic regime of Ben Ali. The breakthrough came in 2013 when the Ministry of Human Rights and Transitional Justice succeeded in getting the “Organic Law on Establishing and Organizing Transitional Justice” adopted by the Constitutional Assembly. This breakthrough was supported by various actors in civil society, as reflected in its first article, which defines transitional justice:

In this law, Transitional Justice shall mean an integrated process of mechanisms and methods used to understand and deal with past human rights violations by revealing their truths, and holding those responsible accountable, providing reparations for the victims and restituting them in order to achieve national reconciliation, preserve and document the collective memory, guarantee the non-recurrence of such violations and transition from an authoritarian state to a democratic system, which contributes to consolidating the system of human rights.³⁶

This landmark law deals with key aspects of transitional justice, including memory, accountability, reparation, and reconciliation. Article 16 of this transitional law establishes the independent “Truth and Dignity Commission,” which will include a legal entity with extensive powers to investigate, conduct public hearings, call witnesses, produce reports, access confidential information, and deliberate on human rights abuses dating from July 1, 1955, up to the Commission’s establishment date.

On January 26, 2014, Tunisia’s National Constituent Assembly voted overwhelmingly to adopt a new Constitution.³⁷ This is widely viewed as a

landmark accomplishment, given the difficulty of achieving political consensus, tensions between Islamists and secularists, and ongoing social and economic unrest. The new constitution asserts Tunisia's Muslim identity, but how it frames and provides for civil liberties are seen as a victory for secularists. The vote followed a political agreement under which Tunisia's main Islamist party, Ennahda, agreed to hand over the political reins to a technocratic, non-partisan government. This agreement ended a months-long political crisis after the assassinations of Belaïd and Brahmi in 2013.³⁸

The new constitution represents a major victory for secularist parties and for pragmatists within Ennahda, who opted for consensus politics instead of an all-or-nothing approach.³⁹ It is hailed as one of the most progressive constitutional documents in the region, with a number of its proclamations, for example, on gender representation in politics, exceeding some European allowances. Most notably, Article Two, which cannot be amended, states that, "Tunisia is a civil state based on citizenship, the will of the people, and the supremacy of law." Article Three states that, "the people are sovereign and the source of authority, which is exercised through the people's representatives and by referendum." These provisions appear to directly counter a foundational argument by many Islamists that religious law trumps civil law. There is no reference to *Sharia* (Islamic law) in the constitution. "Freedom of conscience and belief" (Article Six) is guaranteed, along with gender equality (Article 21), freedom of expression and information (Articles 31–32), freedom of assembly and individual property rights (Article 41), and some aspects of due process (Article 27). The constitution also creates a mixed presidential system, with a directly elected president/head of state who exercises certain powers—notably over defense and foreign affairs—but shares executive authorities with the legislature. This model was preferred by secularist parties, who saw it as creating balances of power, while Ennahda officials had expressed preference for a legislative system, with a president selected by the legislature. Some observers have expressed concern that the mixed system could prove unwieldy in practice or prone to political deadlock.⁴⁰

Consensus Politics: The Troika and Ennahda's Surrender of Power

Ennahda won 90 seats out of a possible 217 in the National Constituent Assembly, the highest share of any political party. Instead of insisting on governing in its own right, Ennahda chose to govern with as many parties as possible and succeeded in forming the governing Troika coalition with

two non-Islamist parties.⁴¹ Two years later, and following the assassinations of Belaïd and Brahmi, Ennahda agreed to a national dialogue mediated by civil society organizations, accepting a hand over of power to a technocratic government, which took place in January 2014. But the post-Arab Spring was still burdened with the twin challenges of economic stagnation and terrorist security threats.⁴²

The retreat from government and its internal divisions do not indicate that Ennahda is no longer powerful—it remains well situated to influence the next phase of Tunisia’s transition. In addition, Ennahda’s compromises established “short-term tactical moves taken in response to an existential threat but motivations may matter less than the resulting pattern of behavior.”⁴³ Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahda selected a trajectory that kept the Islamists inside the political system and the transition on track. It is considered by most observers to be well placed to perform very strongly in the upcoming parliamentary elections, and the Islamist movement will likely remain a significant political force for the foreseeable future.⁴⁴

In June 2014, Ennahda announced it would not field its own candidate for the presidential elections; instead, it would support other more consensual candidates not affiliated with the Islamist party. This development, as Tariq Ramadan has also argued, is a clear indication that Ennahda not only heeded the Egyptian lesson, but, more importantly, does not view ultimate political power as residing in official political authority. The parliamentary elections held on October 26, 2014, resulted in a victory for the secular centrist Nidaa Tounes party, with Ennahda remaining the second largest political entity in the country. Similarly, presidential elections saw the Nidaa Tounes presidential candidate, Beji Caïd Essebsi, win against his main rival from the Troika, outgoing President Moncef Marzouki. Despite the electoral loss of Ennahda, perhaps the most surprising aspect of these elections was the very poor performance of many social-democratic parties led by prominent public figures known for their opposition to the Ben Ali dictatorship. Clearly, the Tunisian electorate is seeking more than just a “militancy credit” from its new political class; rather security, employment, and economic growth are high on the agenda. The “militancy credit” concept refers to opposition parties and human rights’ advocates, who had a history of opposing the Ben Ali dictatorship before the revolution and who expected their “militancy” would ensure for post-revolution electoral success.

THE CHALLENGES FOR POST-REVOLUTION CONSOLIDATION IN TUNISIA

The foremost challenges Tunisia faces in its ongoing political transition include the rise of religious violence represented by Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), a group affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb; the elusiveness of practical and deep reconciliation between Islamist and non-Islamist political parties; and the lack of a clear and practical plan for improving the economy.⁴⁵

The Rise of Religious Violence

Tunisia's small jihadi Salafist community has had a significant impact on the country's domestic political scene since the ousting of the Ben Ali regime. Religiously conservative by definition, the influence and prominence of jihadi Salafis are increasing, particularly as the economy stagnates. Against the backdrop of an overwhelmingly progressive moderate constituency, the Salafists have been advocating the adoption of *Sharia* law in an attempt to undermine the consensus achieved through civil society and held together by Tunisia's various transitional governments. Broad-based Salafi calls for increased restrictions on civil liberties are aimed at undermining Tunisia's new social contract as articulated in the newly adopted progressive Constitution.

In terms of specific groups currently active in Tunisia, Salafis are increasingly divided between constitutional Islamists, like the Islah Front Party (Reform Front Party), licensed in May 2012, and political-military organizations, such as AST. The discourse of the Islah Front is aimed at engaging the political process with a view of winning power electorally by constitutional means.⁴⁶ This agenda is different from other jihadi Salafi groups, such as AST, which advocates the use of violence to achieve its objectives. AST is closely linked to neighboring al-Qaeda affiliated groups throughout the Maghreb.

AST is held accountable for the assassination of secular politicians and thought to be responsible for the worst of the political attacks on the US Embassy in Tunis, in September 2012, and attacks on Tunisian soldiers, in July 2013. While some Salafis have taken Islamic law into their own hands through vigilantism, another small, but growing, group is becoming actively involved in politics and in civil society. In Ennahda's view, Salafism

is a phenomenon imported from the Gulf region. Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz support this argument by stating that the secularist dictators Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali had almost destroyed Islamic education within Tunisia, leaving a space that, “Gulf-financed theocratic extremists rushed to fill amidst the new conditions of greater religious liberty.”⁴⁷

The relationship between Ennahda and Salafi groups is complicated, often characterized as a love–hate relationship, with double discourse deployed by Ennahda and aimed accordingly at different audiences.⁴⁸ Ennahda initially relied on dialogue, encouraging Salafis to organize in political parties and viewing Salafism as a movement capable of moderation through education and political engagement. Many in the Salafist camp, however, are unhappy with Ennahda’s compromise on *Sharia* in the constitution and their decision to hand over power to a non-Islamist government. This frustration will surely affect Tunisia’s fragile transition.⁴⁹ For example, Sheikh Mawlid Ali El-Moujahed, president of the Asalah Party (one of the Salafi political parties), cited the adoption of the constitution as “a turning point” in the relationship with Ennahda, insisting that the party would suffer the consequences:

People do not understand how dissatisfied they are. A “white” coup took place, and Ennahda simply rolled over to the secularists. The people’s voice will be heard...There is a voice for Sharia in Tunisia. Tunisia is a Muslim country and will be ruled by Islam—there is no other way.⁵⁰

In Mansoor Moaddel’s 2013 report, only a minority of Tunisians are in favor of an Islamic government, with a clear majority of respondents favoring secular politics; between 70 and 80% strongly agree or agree that their country would be a better place if religion and politics were separated, and a minority supported *Sharia* law versus sectarian laws. The findings also show only 34% of the respondents have some degree of trust in the Salafists. In general, the findings in Moaddel’s report show that most Tunisians are interested in pragmatic policies to modernize their country and only a small percentage favor radical political activities, even among those who favor *Sharia*.⁵¹

The Polarization Between Islamists and Non-Islamists

One of the more significant challenges to the transitional process in Tunisia has been the ongoing polarized ideological struggle between Islamists and secularists, which has led to a number of political crises, most notably

following the 2013 assassinations. In addition to this ideological split, Tunisia's political spectrum is also characterized by a diversity of Islamists, as well as non-Islamist voices. In terms of electoral representation, Ennahda's share of the vote was 41% in the 2011 elections; the remainder went to a mix of fractured secularist, leftist, communist, and old regime elements. Many of the centrist political groups have merged into the new powerful political player Nidaa Tounes as a way of creating a political counterbalance to Ennahda. This new political actor is supported by the business sector and other wealthy former Ben Ali loyalists who are eager to take political advantage of Ennahda's recent struggles.⁵² Non-Islamist parties almost universally view Ennahda as soft on terrorism and express fears over Ennahda's relationship with Salafists, particularly those accused of engaging in anti-liberal activities and outright violence.

The other concern among non-Islamists is Ennahda's effort to influence the state bureaucracy with appointments of their sympathizers. These appointments, from a non-Islamist perspective, serve as an attempt to strengthen Ennahda's control over the state apparatus, especially after it surrendered political power. These moves are viewed as weakening the state through replacement of experienced civil servants with unskilled bureaucrats loyal to Ennahda, still considered by some non-Islamists to be Tunisia's version of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. As a consequence, relations between the party and some states in the Gulf were damaged over ideological and political disagreements pertaining to events across the region. Indeed, following Ennahda's withdrawal from government, countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, ardent critics of the Muslim Brotherhood, now appear keen to assist Tunisia.⁵³

Lack of Clear, Practical Plans for Tunisia's Economy

Since 2011, the economy has encountered significant problems and has yet to recover. According to the World Bank, Tunisia's unemployment rate remained at 15.7% in the last quarter of 2013, and GDP growth slowed to 2.7% at the end of the same year. Foreign direct investment remains below pre-2011 levels.⁵⁴ The World Bank estimated a financial shortfall for 2013 of 6.2% of GDP.⁵⁵ This deficit is due, primarily, to increased public wages and subsidies, which tripled between 2010 and 2013.⁵⁶

Non-Islamist parties, in particular, voice their concern over the state of the economy, blaming the failure in economic development on the incompetence of Ennahda's appointees. Yet, Nidaa Tounes and the rest of

the secular opposition are short on clear and practical solutions, offering little in the way of explicit programs or policies. Neither Ennahda nor Nidaa Tounes has a clear plan for tackling structural problems or developing the economy. Many on the Tunisian Left are opposed to both Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda and are openly critical of what they consider to be Nidaa's regressive economic policy, arguing that these are designed to protect the interests of the wealthy and those close to the old regime.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the Arab Spring has been the shaking-up of the sociopolitical status quo in the region, even within countries where no popular uprisings were witnessed. This political diversification is summarized by Martin Beck and Simone Hüser in a political rule matrix that employs two key criteria, political transition and authoritarianism on the one hand, and stability or instability on the other.⁵⁷

Even though Tunisia became the first Arab country in more than three decades to receive a ranking of three for political rights on the Freedom House scale in 2012, there have been "some disturbing realities," that present great challenges to the democratization process.⁵⁸ The polarization between Islamists and non-Islamists remains a serious problem, as do the threats of terrorist and religious violence.

There is no doubt that transitions and political reforms are truly atop the political agenda in the Arab world. Yet, "Arab countries are still a long way from democracy. Electoral democracies and semi-authoritarian regimes are likely to emerge as the dominant political form in the Middle East, as they did in much of the post-Soviet world after the end of the Cold War."⁵⁹ As many analysts warn, it would be a mistake to assume the neo-Mamluk rulers have truly gone.⁶⁰ The depths to which these autocratic rulers have penetrated the political processes across the Arab world almost guarantees that expunging them altogether will take time. Indeed, it is likely that the remnants of these neo-Mamluk regimes will attempt to reassert themselves as legitimate political actors and, in the process, regain a level of political influence, if not outright political power. However, as the most recent round of parliamentary and presidential elections has shown the Tunisian electorate has been able to display a sophisticated ability to discern between political parties and opportunistic politicians. The results have created a new balance between two strong political parties (the secularist Nidaa Tounes and the Islamist Ennahda) with a raft of

smaller progressive parties holding the balance of power. Thus, the future for post-revolution Tunisia looks brighter, even if darker threats—at the level of security, politics, and economics—may never disappear altogether from the national landscape.

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The Post-uprising Arab World and the West: Mythology and Cultural Challenges

Robert Bowker

Trapped between the decline of an authoritarian order and the emergence of a new model of Arab modernity, the political foundations of much of the contemporary Middle East are under pressure. The driving forces of change continue to fracture Arab societies in complex ways. While the institutions created by modernizing rulers in the nineteenth century (in the case of Egypt) and in the post-colonial era mostly remain in place, the future of the Arab world will be largely shaped by the ability of reform-minded leaderships to successfully replace models of political authority whose authenticity and relevance to the expectations of contemporary Arab society are increasingly in question. At the government level, as Robert Kaplan observed in 2011, it “is less democracy than the crisis of central authority that will dominate the next phase of Middle Eastern history.”¹

With the shadow of the future hanging over the region, and respect for the established institutions of government and traditional politics eroding in several major Arab countries, primordial loyalties, fears, and concerns have increasingly come to the fore. It remains to be seen whether systemic change within Arab societies will be possible at a pace sufficient to contain the pressures of the coming decade and to establish new and progressive benchmarks for what it means to be both Arab and modern.

THE CHANGING FACE OF ARAB SOCIETY

Consider the case of a young female graduate from the American University in Cairo or King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Jeddah working successfully in the information and communication technology sector, merchant banking, or advertising, with peer-reviewed performance evaluation and achievement-based rewards. She would be experiencing for the first time, like others of her generation, the realization of her creative potential amid the demands of a competitive global marketplace. Yet established expectations may not easily accommodate this trajectory. The pressures on such individuals to reconcile personal aspirations with authoritarian values in the wider society are likely to be felt when she leaves the office in the evening.

The dilemma faced by such women is in no sense a transient social phenomenon in the Arab world. It is, in fact, a reflection of the reality: after many decades in which a façade of secular authoritarian control remained the dominant model of Arab politics, an Arab discourse has emerged focused on the nature, identity, and political values of Arab society itself. This conversation is the inescapable outcome of deeper processes in Arab social, political, and economic life that have joined with various accelerants for change such as Internet connectivity and social media.

Because of their location in deeply contested political, social, and cultural terrain, pressures for change within Arab countries have also encountered resistance. Influential voices within authoritarian regimes and their supporting elements, which include not only elite privileges and vested interests but also family patterns of authority, education systems, and gender imbalances in public life, have difficulty accepting the need for reform, let alone advocating, leading, and sustaining it. Governments face the continuing need to adjust their policies according to the often-competing wishes and concerns of military and security elements whose interaction with—and, often, reliance on—executive authority lie at the very core of those regimes. There is a concerted effort in Egypt, in particular, to limit the freedom of political expression by youthful, unelected activists.

As the previous hypothetical example illustrates, the cumulative effects of rising levels of education, literacy, improved health and nutrition,² communications technology, foreign direct investment by major multinational companies with business models based on the dictates of the global marketplace and management standards have produced a generation of Arabs, which expects a larger voice in decisions affecting their lives. Demands for

justice, dignity, and accountability of governments represent a paradigm shift in the Arab world in favor of popular political empowerment, from which no Arab state ultimately can remain immune. It is a phenomenon that may be delayed, but will not easily be denied. The changes in Arab society are irreversible.

ENDING SYKES-PICOT?

Common sense requires considerable caution in foreshadowing the ways in which the current and emerging social, political, and economic issues will come together and be addressed by the region and its leaders in coming years. It is appropriate to ask, however, whether the evidence suggests that the model of Arab modernity most likely to emerge will be an inclusive, empowered, progressive one—as most Arab reformists hope—or whether it will focus instead on the preservation of collective memories, real and imagined, and be largely risk-averse and inward-looking.

As a starting point for such a line of enquiry, it is instructive to ask why the foundations of the contemporary Arab world stemming from the imperial era—from the rule of Lord Cromer, the British Controller-General and later Consul-General in Egypt from 1883 to 1907, to the final dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War—continue to be so important, not only in terms of national sovereignty but also in regard to the interlinked issues of political values and cultural expression.³

Subject populations experienced fundamentally unequal and often conflictual dealings with external powers during the colonial (or Mandate) era. That period saw political agreements, such as the infamous Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the Balfour Declaration of 1917, resolving Western political dilemmas and needs at the expense of Arab aspirations. It saw the brokering of postwar settlements among the major European powers, and the negotiation bilaterally, between European states and a handful of Arab leaders, of demarcated borders in the early 1920s.

But the imperial era also saw the transmission and migration of a range of non-traditional, modernizing capabilities and values from the Western powers into Arab societies. Less noted, but no less important, it also witnessed the sponsorship in Egypt of key modernizing Muslim reformists such as Muhammad Abduh, the demands for women's rights by feminists such as Huda Sha'arawi, and the emergence of nationalist politics through the efforts of such figures as Saad Zaghloul and the Wafd Party. It was a

period of remarkable creativity in Arab literature, journalism, cinema, and music. Yet the reluctance of authoritarian Arab leaders who inherited the institutions of the colonial period to cede power—initially while pursuing nationalist visions and subsequently amid the seductive and corrosive effects of power itself—effectively ensured stasis.

Although states gained a degree of strength through the role of the leader, in most respects primordial loyalties remained powerful and, all too often, stronger than the institutions of the state. Recognizing the inherent risks in such situations for the pursuit of their visions of modernity (and arguably also sensitive to the risks to the interests of elites themselves), Arab regimes were at pains to permit no substantial intellectual, ideological, or interest-based challenges to their authority. Supported by popular anxiety about the unknown and untried, economic and political dysfunction was addressed using a mixture of coercion and co-optation rather than through the determined pursuit of reform.

Ongoing social change, however, fundamentally weakened the capacity of states merely to override their dilemmas. The connections between political dysfunction and economic underperformance in the established Arab model became more apparent. Unmet demands for economic security and social justice weighed ever more heavily upon the Arab outlook. After decades of failure to respond effectively to those demands, despite the introduction of reforms to economic processes, which left the values underpinning the systems themselves largely unchanged, authoritarian regimes no longer looked untouchable.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 represented the historical moment at which the barrier of fear that had protected most Arab regimes was finally shattered. Although popular anxiety about the future, and nostalgia for a less complicated era later resulted in a strong demand for the restoration of stability and authoritarian leadership in Egypt, Arab governments in general will have little choice but to respond more effectively to the demands for accountability and transparency, like those which emerged prior to 2011. We have seen the emergence of a more connected, politically sophisticated Arab audience, amid great uncertainty about what it might mean, for a younger generation, to be simultaneously Arab, modern, and Muslim. Fundamental issues of power, legitimacy, freedom, and authenticity have emerged and are being contested in a cauldron of social, economic, political, and human chemistry without parallel in Arab history.

EGYPT

In the case of post-Hosni Mubarak Egypt, the experience of a Muslim Brotherhood-led government had a powerful cautionary impact on attitudes concerning political Islam, including the fear that Egypt was embarking upon a political course that would ultimately intrude into areas of personal lifestyle and behavior, along with observation of the extraordinary carnage witnessed in Syria, Iraq, Gaza, and elsewhere in the region. Egyptians remain more or less comfortable with the fundamentals of an authoritarian political order that is broadly consistent with (and perhaps a natural reflection of) authoritarian values at home, in education and in society at large. Such values are changing across Egyptian society as a whole, but very unevenly.

Deeply polarized by the events of 2013 and with seemingly insurmountable levels of unemployment, especially among graduates, Egypt has rarely seemed more socially, economically, and politically fragile. It faces a growing burden of environmental issues, principal among which is the prospect of reduced water from the Nile as global warming affects catchment areas and economic development upstream impacts on water availability. Within a few years, it will need to cater to an aging population without adequate provision for publicly funded social safety nets.

At this stage, there is little appetite among Egyptians for the liberal values that attracted the support of the early generation of Arab nationalist political and cultural activists, nor for the core enabling values and practices that made Western-styled democracies attractive. Democracy as a slogan enjoyed popular applause as the events of 2011 reached their climax, but there was—and still is—little evidence of tolerance for views and values at odds with those of the government. Popular acceptance of the notions of pluralism, effective demarcation and separation of powers, media freedom and professionalism, and other liberal values remains a distant prospect beyond very limited segments of the urban cosmopolitan elite. Close financial and strategic integration with Saudi Arabia and the other conservative Arab states, and the absence of a credible Islamist alternative to Salafist voices at the popular level bode ill for the future of Arab debate on social issues and political freedoms.

There is little reason to doubt that, for its part, the Egyptian military would rather not be responsible for day-to-day politics and issues beyond national defense and security and the protection of its extensive, largely

indirect, political influence and commercial interests. But while they favor elections in principle, and backed General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's candidature for the presidency, they will pay close attention to ensuring that the enabling systems of democracy preserve their ultimate control over Egypt's future. The military have time on their side and the upper hand in terms of capacity ultimately to use coercive force against terrorism and dissent. So long as they remain set on removing the Muslim Brotherhood as a political factor in Egypt's future, and can argue the case that stability in Egypt represents a vital strategic interest for the Arab Gulf states, they seem reasonably assured of continuing financial support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The efforts by the el-Sisi government and established political interests to quash criticism of human rights abuses in the name of national security, the imprisonment of activists and critics, the firm public alignment of many others with the military-backed regime, and the deep polarization evident within Egyptian society underline the problems in sustaining hope that democracy promotion can make a positive difference. Neither the coercive capacity of the regime, nor any arguments on the Islamist side for compromise, which might emerge in time, will be as strong as in the days when, for the Brotherhood at least, the struggle was difficult but not existential, the political audience was fairly docile, and the economy was performing reasonably well. Major unresolved issues of transitional justice and internal security reform remain unaddressed, and the inclination of the military and the Egyptian judiciary to proceed in that direction is questionable.

SOCIETAL AND POLITICAL VALUES AND THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

There are deeper drivers of Middle East affairs than the values and needs of the nation-state. Over the remainder of this decade at least, we may expect to see a younger—but poorly organized—generation of reform-minded Islamists who focus on Islamic principles simultaneously struggling to survive an onslaught of repression (in the case of Egypt) or failure to gain political traction (in Tunisia) while pitted against followers of neo-traditional versions of Islam. The latter include increasingly vocal Salafist political streams, which take a Saudi-inspired, puritanical and

literalist approach to Islamic scripture⁴; and other groups which, in their frustration with the existing Arab order, reject the institutional basis of government altogether. Both the conservative forces within the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists are skeptical or largely unconcerned about external reactions to their approaches to both social and foreign policy matters.

Among a population where 72% of young Egyptians believe an enriched spiritual life to be essential (compared to 53% of Jordanians and 38% of young Syrians),⁵ neo-traditionalists can frame their notions of promoting conservative Islamic identity as an authentic response to social and economic insecurity and Western-backed Arab reformists' demands for change. The challenge will be for progressive-minded Egyptian reformists—both Islamist and secular—to surmount, or at least survive, the counter pressures that have arisen regarding the linking of Islam and political activity since 2013.

The emerging Arab political environment contains contradictory elements and demands. In some cases, pressures for change have been contained through recognition by leadership that reform is necessary. In Morocco, the scale and intensity of demonstrations fell after King Mohammed VI announced constitutional reforms, which included a policy of appointing the prime minister from the leadership of the party commanding a parliamentary majority. Promises of reform have contained pressures in security concerns as well as Oman.⁶ In Jordan, the build-up of pressure for reform has been limited by security concerns as well as by the historical place of the Hashemite rulers as the arbiter between the mutually suspicious East Bank Jordanians and their Palestinian Jordanian counterparts. But demands that King Abdullah make constitutional reforms are growing.⁷

Elsewhere, the civil war in Syria continues with its civilian carnage and destruction of the core elements of Syrian society and the state itself. The Kurds of Iraq see a future pregnant with national possibilities—but Iraq's fate as a nation may be the failure either to remain a unitary state or to divide into separate parts. As it transforms into an energy-importing country—which will occur only a couple of decades from now—the capacity of Saudi Arabia to deal with its burgeoning population according to its long-standing policy mix of rentierism, authoritarian rule, and religious orthodoxy will be tested. Yemen, in addition to suffering from civil war, external military intervention, political turbulence, and chronically insecure food supplies, could quite simply run out of water for its rapidly growing population.

On the other hand, where regimes have fallen (as in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya), where the authority of the established institutions of the state has been severely weakened (as in Iraq, Syria, and Sudan) or where regimes presided over virtually failed states anyway (Yemen and Somalia), the process of building effective governments will be correspondingly difficult and protracted. Credible political leadership will be essential for that process to succeed—and it may not always be forthcoming.

In almost all Arab countries, the constitutional and political balances, institutions, values, vision, and disposition of reformed and successor regimes will take years, perhaps decades, to develop and mature. There will be problems securing transitional justice and managing populist demands for economic benefits for those who were long denied but have finally achieved political influence. Economic growth through private sector activity, critical to meeting demands for jobs and economic security, will not regain momentum without a much higher level of political stability and predictability.⁸ Priorities will take time to define. Throughout the process, interim rulers will be challenged by hard political bargaining and ideological and sectarian divisions.

In Syria, prolonged conflict has undermined the institutions of the state itself, heightening the risk that Syria will become a post-apocalyptic patchwork of fiefdoms competing for turf, profit, and sectarian advantage and locked in recurrent cycles of violence. In Egypt, the combination of ongoing political and economic malaise has created a real risk of ultimately failing to build strong and effective civil society institutions and fostering a confident, progressive view of Arab modernity. Not only Egyptians but also most regional countries would suffer from the emergence of an even more alienated and marginalized younger generation of Egyptians. The capacity of leading Western countries to generate respect for their advocacy of democratic values for the Arab world of the twenty-first century would also be damaged.

ISLAMIC STATE

Just as the values and practices associated with secular Arab political structures have been called into question by the weight of pressure for reform and rising popular levels of political mobilization, both Islamist and secular, so too has the traditionally quietist political orientation of Salafist scholars and personalities come under scrutiny by those searching for a direct link between religion and politics.⁹ Of particular concern in this context is the rise in Iraq and Syria of the Islamic State (IS) movement, a phenomenon

which, in the words of Hussein Ibish, reflects “a profound crisis in the culture and hierarchies of moral and religious values that have taken root in parts of (Sunni Arab) societies.”¹⁰ As Hassan Hassan has cogently observed, IS represents “a symptom—of a political vacuum, a sense of rejection among Sunnis, and an ideological shakeup within Salafism.”¹¹

In addition to its territorial ambitions, IS articulates a redemptive and motivating vision that provides a sense of identity in rejecting established (temporal) authority and jihadist alternatives. The so-called “dignity of jihad” has appealed among the young, alienated, and frustrated, who see themselves—and Arab Sunnis, in general—as humiliated. To those who subscribe to the cause, it offers a sense of empowerment and a divinely sanctioned opportunity to fight with a moral purpose.¹² It is a classic irredentist movement, reveling in its self-image as the challenger to the Arab and Muslim status quo. Moreover, it is a long-term ideological challenge. Regardless of whether it proves able to retain territory, its appeal is grounded in factors which Arab governments are unlikely to be able to address effectively, let alone resolve, in the foreseeable future.

Whatever emerges in Syria and Iraq, a proportion of jihadists now engaged in that conflict will return to their Arab and Western countries of origin. Some will have lost faith in the cause for which they fought on the basis of firsthand observation of the venality and political realities of civil war. As with the volunteers from the Socialist International who participated in the Spanish Civil War and were later disillusioned by the pact between Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler and the revelation of Stalin’s atrocities after the Second World War, a loss of credibility for the pretensions of the so-called Islamic Caliphate may bring an end to the activism of some jihadists without draconian measures on the part of governments. For others, however, the motivation for returning will be ideological. It will be strengthened by a newly discovered sense of identity, peer recognition, and self-esteem. If the Islamic Caliphate becomes entrenched in northern Syria and northern Iraq (and economic and historical connections between the two areas are quite strong), the potential for ongoing violence by a proportion of that cohort against their opponents, or in support of the objectives of the Caliphate has to be recognized.

MYTHOLOGY, CULTURE, AND THE WEST

In Egypt and elsewhere, attempts to empower Arab audiences present both risks and opportunities for the pursuit of Western interests. Within Arab societies, a high level of suspicion surrounds the perceived

involvement of foreigners or individuals closely associated with external parties in the strengthening of Arab political institutions.¹³ This is the case even where change has already taken place from within and where reform of traditional values and practices has long been recognized by Arab intellectuals as overdue. Notwithstanding the courage and passion with which Arab intellectuals have argued for reform, including in the Arab Human Development Report series of publications starting in 2002,¹⁴ foreign-sponsored programs directed at engagement with Arab civil society—including support for sectarian bridge-building and national reconciliation efforts following bouts of turmoil or conflict—have an associated risk of generating accusations of external involvement in domestic politics under the guise of supporting human rights.

As Steven Cook has observed, notwithstanding the expectations held in some quarters about the use of American power, conflicts over such basic questions as identity, nationality, and citizenship can only be resolved within the countries concerned.¹⁵ Programs intended to support those organizations whose values are (at least ostensibly) democratic will also inevitably involve highly subjective judgments by Western governments about the short and long-term commitment of such organizations to that goal; the likely extent of the resistance of Arab governments to widening effective political space to the advantage of organizations and interests beyond their control; and the degree to which civil society groups will adhere to values of political openness and accountability. Achieving coherence between secular and Islamist groups and advocating for a realistic balance between demands for predictability and demands for change will be ongoing political challenges.

The assumption that a strengthened civil society will lead to democratic change in the authoritarian Arab context is itself questionable. It is clear that in the coming few years, reformists in both Islamist and secular parties will need to be more active and effective in seeking to capture the political imagination of the emerging Arab middle class. Arab civil society, however, is not necessarily either civil or liberal in a Western sense. Within its overall umbrella, a range of groups and movements with radically different values and ideologies—not all of which are either democratic or inclusive in regard to the concerns and interests of others—cooperate, compete, or are marginalized by regimes.

Beyond the ranks of non-governmental organizations seeking financial assistance and/or hoping to exert external pressure on their own governments, there is no obvious rationale, from an Arab perspective, for

Western involvement in strengthening Arab governments and civil society. This skepticism extends to those Western governments and institutions offering to support election training and monitoring projects with the aim of achieving reforms or capacity building at the systemic level. While opportunistic interventions may be made through embassies and government aid agencies, efforts at a programmatic level to engage Arab civil society are better left, at least for the next few years, to those Arab countries which are willing to accept that external engagement in such programs is both feasible and necessary.

Politically and socially, Egypt—and most of the Arab world—has become more regressive than progressive in spirit compared to the heady days of January 2011.¹⁶ Whether we are witnessing a reversion to the power of the deep state in Egypt, or whether it might be more accurate to argue that it never really lost its grip on the essentials of power in the first place, the current phase of political life has seen the Egyptian military and security apparatus clearly in the ascendant. The challenges to the Western promotion of values of political inclusiveness and constitutionality will be even greater if we see the reassertion of a conservative political order in the Middle East, based upon the determination of Saudi Arabia and Egypt to quash any re-emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, and a conjunction of interest with Israel to that end.¹⁷

In short, the prospects are limited for Western countries to exert significant influence upon the direction of the region since the tumultuous events of 2011. The idea of democratic legitimacy has been fatally wounded, at least for this generation of voters and for Islamist activists. The region faces an extended period in which the authority of states has been weakened.¹⁸ And the weakening of Arab states, more than sectarianism or the rise of Islamist ideologies, has created the battlefields of a new Middle East Cold War linking domestic conflicts, transnational affinities, and regional state ambitions.¹⁹

The turmoil of the past few years and the gloom that surrounds the immediate Arab outlook should not, however, obscure three key matters as far as Western countries are concerned. First, the factors that gave rise to this period of unprecedented turmoil are in some ways more important than the political outcomes that have emerged since that period. As already argued, we are witnessing the early stages of a process that is more likely to be shaped by enduring forces for progress—including education, health, nutrition, connectivity, and wage-based female employment—than by the resistance of neo-traditionalist opponents of change.

Recognizing the potential for worst-case scenarios should not cause observers to dismiss factors capable of making a positive difference to the present situation. The political, economic, and social challenges ahead for the Arab countries are formidable. Political and social regression is a real possibility. The capacity to harness the intellectual energy of a more empowered political audience may take a long time to gain political traction. But among Arab countries that have not descended into civil war, the ability to make further progress in terms of human security and economic development is more likely, on balance, to improve than to regress over the coming decade. Over a generation—possibly longer—the majority of Arab political systems can evolve, mainly through their own efforts, toward meeting a broad desire among young adults, both male and female, to be regarded as both Arab and modern. If such a balance can be struck, the processes of change now under way in countries such as Tunisia and Morocco will probably, within a generation, produce somewhat more open and responsive political systems.²⁰

Most Arab states are middle-income countries with well-established, albeit poorly performing, institutions. More transparent and empowering business, social, and economic environments will help address the problems arising from decades-long institutional inertia. The process will be strengthened when demands for intellectual and personal freedoms are sustained through the courage and commitment of reformists rebounding from the reverses experienced since 2011. In short, a reversion to the patterns of behavior witnessed under Arab leaderships before 2011—including as part of a conservative counter-revolution sponsored or sustained by Saudi Arabia and Egypt—is, on balance, a less likely scenario than a gradual, yet assuredly painful, search for new and more productive dealings between the Arab state and society.

Second, if Western countries wish their values to be respected among those who are most active in the promotion of reform, they will need to be active in seeking ways to support those progressive elements who share those values and who are willing to work for them. They may have no real choice except to cooperate with and deliver their ideas, experience, and material assistance through the states and state-sponsored institutions of the countries concerned, accepting that such dealings may not always be easy to reconcile with other foreign policy priorities and values. It will be very challenging to find a defensible balance between the need to influence government policies through engagement and the need to

avoid legitimizing behavior they oppose. But at the end of the day, the Arab state remains the only means by which visions of progressive reform may be transformed into policy and applied for the benefit of citizens in general.

If it is accepted that state-to-state dealings will continue to provide the best basis for arriving at a reasonably durable balance between the various interests and objectives of each counterpart under any given circumstances, then within those parameters, Western countries should continue trying to identify specific areas and institutions through which a positive and constructive Western contribution to strengthening the resilience of Arab states and societies may prove to be of enduring benefit to all parties. At a practical level, one approach may be to focus on those areas in which all sides agree urgent action is required. It might be agreed, for example, to accord high priority in improving food security and strengthening the agricultural sectors in Arab countries, making effective use of established multilateral and Arab regional institutions. Humanitarian relief will also be of great importance to the vulnerable populations displaced by regional conflicts.

Finally, it needs to be understood that although the forces that prioritize security over democracy and that would prefer to see a return to the predictability of the pre-Arab uprisings era are presently in the political ascendancy, they face the risk of failing to capture the energy and pent-up initiative of a younger generation of Arab citizens. This generation's visions of modernity, their place in it, and their political concerns are unlikely to result in the ongoing acceptance of regime-imposed limits in the name of national security. Regimes may be able to harness such aspirations to the achievement of national goals and channel them into political forms through constitutionally based processes, but they cannot hope to repress them indefinitely.

If there is a tide in Middle Eastern history, it is most likely to favor those regimes that see the insecurity associated with change as an inevitable challenge that is also, under the right conditions of political leadership, an opportunity for renewal. It is unlikely to favor those regimes that see reform mostly as a threat. Nor are Western countries likely to be disposed toward extending their support to the latter beyond the narrow parameters of promoting their own security interests. The larger issue of being a respected part of world society, with the realization of the full potential of all citizens, will depend overwhelmingly on winning such acceptance.

CONCLUSION

Deep changes unseen for 100 years are now unfolding in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Gaza. The consequences of the rebalancing of power and influence among institutions, political forces, and ideas within those and other countries of the region will be felt around the world. To carry an analogy from *Game of Thrones*, one step further, we should perhaps have seen that after the Arab Spring, winter would come. There is a new Arab cold war under way. Western countries need to have the capacity to analyze and reflect on where their interests are affected. But there are also opportunities to work with those countries of the region that seek to come to grips with the challenges ahead.

The way forward demands a process, embedded in transparent, inclusive institutions, of establishing a new and broadly accepted paradigm of Arab modernity in support of which the energy and resources of leaders, state, and society can be directed. The aspirations and expectations of an Arab generation—typified by the sort of individual described at the outset of this chapter, and now reaching its most politically active years—cannot be satisfied with anything less.

The future, however, is clouded by uncertainty. Authoritarian models that rely mostly on electoral outcomes or military interventions to defend the authority of governments to determine political directions or even to dictate social values, while at the same time failing to protect the most basic freedoms of their own citizens against bigotry and xenophobia, will not widen the space for intellectual creativity and social progress.

It should be a high priority for Western countries to find effective ways to support the efforts of progressive Arab reformists and to avoid the pitfalls of engagement in political contests. They should be willing to develop programs to develop programs of practical cooperation with Arab countries as they seek to strengthen their capacity to surmount the enormous economic and social challenges they now face.

It will be Arabs who reboot Arab values. Assistance from beyond the Arab world to secure the Arab future requires patience, consistency and persistence in defending principles. It demands a willingness to listen to what reformists say they need if they are to play an effective part. It also requires a willingness to judge dispassionately—never a simple task in a heated political environment—whether the timing and character of the support that is sought represent the best way forward in any particular context. The key challenge, however, will be to remain

relevant to the forces shaping the regional outlook—through linkages at institutional levels, people-to-people contact, and the sharing of experience and ideas—as the momentum for reform re-gathers its strength in coming years.

NOTES

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2. Over the past 30 years, Arab life expectancy has risen by 15 years; mortality rates among under-fives have fallen by two-thirds; adult literacy has increased 200% and women’s literacy has increased 300%. In Egypt, contraception rates rose from 30% to 1984–57% in 2000; absolute poverty fell from 52% in 1981–20% by 2005; and the percentage of unmarried males aged 30 or above fell from 63% in the 1990s to 45% in 2006. Internet usage has increased from 650,000 in 1990 to around 11 million today. For a more detailed analysis of the Middle East socioeconomic and environmental outlook, including references for most of the evidence cited, see Robert Bowker, *Egypt and the Politics of Change in the Arab Middle East*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2010.
3. These issues are discussed in greater detail in Robert Bowker, *Ending Sykes-Picot: The Arab world and the West after 2011*. HH Sheik Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Publication Series no. 7 (September 2013), www.dur.ac.uk/resources/alsabah/al-SabahPaperBowkerSeptember2013.pdf (accessed June 30, 2015).
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Political Economy Dynamics in the Arab Gulf States: Implications for Political Transition

Matthew Gray

One of the seemingly paradoxical aspects of the post-2010 uprisings in the Arab world was the fact that the unrest occurred so disproportionately in Arab republics rather than in the monarchies. Bahrain was an exception, where a very substantial share of the population took to the streets to protest against the ruling Al Khalifa regime and to demand political and other reforms. Bahrain's uprising, however, was the product of some very particular dynamics, including not just the often-cited problem of sectarianism but also the popular anger at corruption, limited opportunities, and broken promises of political reform by King Hamad since taking power in 1999. Smaller protests in Oman, predominantly driven by popular resentment of corruption, and unrest among the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province also occurred, with the Saudi Shi'a unrest a simmering problem for the regime. But beyond Bahrain, the Gulf states were not threatened with revolution by the uprisings, and some states, such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), saw effectively no protests at all. The experience of many Arab republics—Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, where leaders were either removed by protests or where violent struggles emerged from the uprisings—was not the experience of the Gulf monarchies.

PREMATURE REPORTS OF THE DEATH OF MONARCHIES

The relative stability of the Gulf states represents a paradox. Political scientists had long assumed that monarchies were passé, their power and prospects waning. In the 1960s—the high point for secular, modernizing republican

politics in the Arab world—grim prospects were foretold for monarchies in developing states. They were a relic of British colonialism, surviving through elite bargains and, if necessary, repression.¹ Samuel Huntington famously predicted an imminent—perhaps violent—end for most of the monarchies of the Middle East and Asia.² He argued that monarchies lacked legitimacy not only because of their hereditary processes of succession, but also because of their centralized power, excluding swathes of the population from politics and its privileges. This, he argued, meant that change and modernization would eventually necessitate reforms that a monarchy would lack the flexibility and inclusiveness to undertake without grave risk of losing power: in essence, “the king’s dilemma.”³ Similar ideas or variations on this argument emerged around the same time.⁴ Fred Halliday’s Marxian prediction in the mid-1970s of revolutions in the Arabian Peninsula, while ultimately erroneous, was a notable work.⁵ For many years, “the king’s dilemma” and the threat of revolution seemed very plausible: after all, monarchies were overthrown or nudged out of power in Egypt, Iraq, the Yemen Arab Republic, Libya, and elsewhere in the 1950s and 1960s, and the new republics that replaced them seemed to possess both legitimacy and popularity.⁶ A decade later, Iran’s Pahlavi dynasty came to an end in the 1978–79 revolution, with the new regime in Tehran promising to “export” its revolution across the waters of the Gulf and into the wider region.

Yet, by the 1980s, the Arab monarchies remained in power, seemingly having survived this period of challenge from republicanism.⁷ By the late 1990s—and certainly by the dawn of the twenty-first century, as a third oil price boom commenced and the Gulf leaders appeared to open their societies and economies to the world—an argument could be made that the Gulf was, in fact, the development and stability success story of the Arab world.⁸ Scholars still occasionally predict future trouble for the Gulf monarchies,⁹ and from time to time even prophesize their coming demise,¹⁰ but many such arguments are overplayed given the relative stability of the Gulf monarchies, their enormous wealth, and the varying sources of legitimacy and durability available to Gulf leaderships.

This chapter argues that the Gulf states, in general, represent a relative economic success; but the characteristics that account for their accomplishments also impede political reform, pluralization, and democratization. Caveats must, of course, be placed on such an assertion. Bahrain is an obvious case in which the regime faces more sustained societal opposition and would have poor prospects were it not for the support of Saudi Arabia. The Al Khalifa dynasty may yet fall, or at least have to negotiate

a far-reaching political bargain with society. Oman, less glaringly, faces a decline in oil income within the next decade or so and has made few reforms to address this. A central issue in Oman also concerns the stability of the system, as Sultan Qaboos has not appointed an heir nor created a transparent succession process for when he ultimately dies or leaves office. In other cases, however, the Gulf monarchies are stable. They are all deeply embedded in their societies and economies and are increasingly politically responsive and adaptable. What follows is an explanation of why the Gulf has the political economies it does; above all, why Gulf political economies allow extensive economic changes and reforms, while obstructing the prospects for a similar transformation in the political sphere.

EXPLAINING THE POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF THE GULF

The political economies of the Gulf are structured in such a way that they are remarkably durable, favorable to incumbent regimes and leaders because of the wealth delivered by energy rents, coupled with a state penetration of the economy, a careful process of managed globalization, and the use of credible political narratives and elite-based networks to manage state–society interactions. Three features of the Gulf monarchies’ political economies are explained in the following three sections: their late-stage rentier dynamics, their new and entrepreneurial state capitalism, and their selective and politically informed response to globalization and methods of presenting economic and social change to society. A few words are also included on historical legitimacy, neopatrimonialism, and national branding strategies, which are the main additional elements that link to these three core dynamics. In combination, these factors sustain the political order by reinforcing existing patterns of power, sharing wealth while leaving the state with considerable freedom from society, and allaying pressure for democratic transitions or any other bottom-up or society-led political change.

The Evolution and Nature of Rentierism in the Gulf

Economics has driven the political fate of the modern Gulf states—and economics has been dominated by energy rents and their impacts. This is not to argue that rents are exclusively or uniformly deterministic in their political economy impacts. Other dynamics, from the historically derived legitimacy of rulers and the institutional mechanisms of politics,¹¹ to the

agency of societal forces and the impacts of wider social and technological change,¹² also play a role in Gulf politics. Yet, rents are the predominant and single largest factor shaping Gulf political economies. They have been important since the mid-twentieth century—and central since the first oil price boom began in 1973—because of their economic characteristics, as well as their political impacts. Rents provide co-optive and repressive capacity for the state and the ruling dynasty, reinforcing (often long-extant) patterns of privilege, helping fund state- and nation-building projects, and shaping and skewing overall macroeconomic performance.

A consistent, but certainly not unanimous, theoretical approach to the political economies of the Gulf since the late 1980s has been rentier state theory (RST) and its variants. The fundamental argument of RST is that rents—meaning externally derived, usually unproductively earned income derived from natural resources or other innate assets or features of a state’s geography or history—deeply impact and shape the relationship between state and society. It argues that when rents reach a certain level (40% of state income is commonly cited), the state becomes “allocative” rather than “extractive” (raising and redistributing tax monies).¹³ This gives the state autonomy from society, early RST argued, because society is enticed into political obedience, or suppressed if necessary, as a result of this income. Early RST by scholars such as Hussein Mahdavy, Hazem Beblawi, and Giacomo Luciani¹⁴ was relatively simple: it often explained the absence of democracy in basic, even essentialist, terms, suggesting that state autonomy was virtually absolute and that the state required almost no economic or foreign policies.¹⁵ Above all, it claimed to provide an answer for why oil states were wealthy yet not democratic, asserting that rents meant, quite simply, that the state did not need to make such concessions to society.

The Arab Gulf states’ political economies since the 1990s, however, are not fully explained by such rudimentary arguments. They have become too globalized and driven by development plans and socioeconomic strategies to do so, and states are increasingly responsive to society, even though they have not genuinely democratized, in line with the predictions of early RST. The basic notion of RST—that states will be able to coopt or coerce society into accepting non-democratic political arrangements in exchange for a share of rents—remains convincing, but a theory of “late-stage” or “late” rentierism is a more nuanced approach to the contemporary Gulf. This theory has been explained in detail previously,¹⁶ but in short, it treats rentierism as a political dynamic rather than a structural explanation for state–society relations and dismisses the claim that state autonomy can be

bought solely with rents. The Gulf states have become more politically sophisticated as they have become late-stage rentiers: they have sought to avoid making political concessions—especially any genuine moves toward democratic political processes—but the survival of rentier arrangements has required the state to be increasingly responsive to the needs and views of society. This is why leaderships have introduced or expanded the roles of legislatures, created new electoral processes in some areas of government, and often permitted society certain new freedoms, while ultimately surrendering very little true central power. While still rentier, these states are late-stage rentier specifically because they still require a broad—if not especially deep—base of tolerance from society and a fundamental level of legitimacy if they are to survive. This explains why the 2011 protests in Bahrain frightened the leaderships of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman, and why they dispensed handsome amounts of largesse in response.¹⁷ It demonstrates that the Gulf states are not at all autonomous from the societies they rule; they in fact are embedded in and reliant on them.

Late-stage rentierism has also shaped state development thinking and strategy, and economic policymaking, more generally. The rentier arrangement includes by its very nature important economic concessions by the state to society, but states have increasingly made a deeper development pact with society, usually offering this in lieu of political concessions. In the past two decades, all six Gulf monarchies have implemented ambitious but carefully managed socioeconomic development strategies, nevertheless informed by rentier-related political goals. The spectacular globalized development of Dubai as a commercial, trading, and tourism hub in the sub-region is an example, with Qatar, Abu Dhabi, Oman, and others also seeking equally substantial, if also slightly different, transformations. This is a further evidence of the inaccuracy or incompleteness of the state autonomy argument. These states are engaging in genuine attempts at real economic development and authentic changes to parts of their political economies. That said, it suits leaderships and incumbent elites that such policies reinforce and solidify existing, rentier-based patterns of privilege and power. Moreover, the impetus for state action in response to social and political pressures will only increase in the future, as Gulf rulers face the political-economic impacts of population growth,¹⁸ social and technological change,¹⁹ and other such dynamics. Similar matters perhaps could be ignored by rentiers a generation ago, but addressing them has now become imperative. Gulf leaders today ignore the risks of external change to their great peril.

The implications of late-stage rentierism for political transition and democratization are not substantively different from those argued by earlier rentier theory. Both concur that genuine or extensive democratization is unlikely, and that states and leaders are well entrenched politically by their control of rent flows. The main distinction between earlier and late-stage rentier arguments is that the latter permits the state a measure of responsiveness to society—indeed, it requires it. The state does not have to truly democratize, but nor can it ignore society. Moreover, the political elite, embedded in social and commercial settings, can never be autonomous from society, nor will society choose to be politically ignorant and voiceless. Late-stage rentier processes explain much about the present-day Gulf states: it explains the conspicuous but very limited political reforms of the past several decades; it shows why Gulf cities appear quite globalized; and it suggests that authoritarian systems can still engage in discreet or informal dialogue with society, allowing political expression through unconventional channels such as cultural production, informal social networks, and online spaces.

The Gulf's Redefined and Entrepreneurial State Capitalism

The rentier dynamic is probably the single most salient characteristic of the Gulf monarchies, although it is related to the second main feature of the Gulf monarchies' political economies: their relatively new and dynamic form of patrimonial but entrepreneurial state capitalism. The oil booms of the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, and then the shock of low oil prices in the later 1980s and through the 1990s,²⁰ strengthened the Gulf's activist and entrepreneurial form of state capitalism. States became more cognizant of oil as a finite resource with an ultimate, if unknown, expiration date. This reinforced the case for economic diversification, which implied a need for—or at least the risk of—social and political change. The Gulf regimes, already state capitalist, responded by creating more dynamic state capitalist political economies, in which the state could lead the diversification and development processes, while retaining pronounced control over any accompanying social and political changes.

The Gulf's contemporary form of state capitalism is an investment friendly and entrepreneurial one, similar to Ian Bremmer's "new" state capitalism.²¹ It remains "state capitalism" because the state allows market-price mechanisms to operate and the private sector to play a (measured) role in the economy, but the state remains the overarching actor in the

economy and the largest owner of the means of production. It is “entrepreneurial” state capitalism because of its efficiency, profit motive, and strategic creativity, backed by states that are activist and ambitious to engage economically with the outside world. The state eschews politically risky neoliberal economic liberalization²² and also avoids the trap of dirigisme and the inefficiencies and political interests fostered or sustained by economic centralization. This sets it apart quite starkly from the older state capitalism of the post-independence Arab republics, in which the state sought to dominate the planning process to ensure certain development outcomes for its popular social bases, develop heavy industry, and underwrite import-substitution policies.

The new state capitalism, in great contrast, sees the state set strategic goals and visions rather than seeking to centrally plan or manage the economy; favor the service sector and pursue late-late-development by bypassing most industrialization; and, usually, set in place the mechanisms for investment attraction and export-led economic growth rather than pursue import-substitution policies. The new state capitalism accounts for the Gulf monarchies’ state-owned but profit-driven and largely efficient national oil and gas companies²³ and, beyond these, the powerful but profitable state-owned firms in other sectors. For example, a large percentage of Dubai’s major firms are state-owned businesses that fall under either the Dubai World or Dubai Holding groups.²⁴ In Saudi Arabia, firms such as Saudi Basic Industries Corporation and the National Commercial Bank may be listed on the stock exchange and have managerial autonomy, but a majority of their shares are state-owned.²⁵ Other businesses and sectors—airlines, telecommunications firms, many financial services firms, and defense industries—are more conspicuously state-controlled or even outright state-owned, but still for the most part efficiently managed. Finally, the Gulf’s state capitalism favors certain key private sector actors, what Bremmer calls “national champions.”²⁶ In the Gulf, these are mostly the large firms owned and operated by royals, merchant families, or a few other well-connected local, and occasionally foreign, businesspeople.²⁷

The extent of state involvement does not mean that a genuine private sector does not exist, or that only a few big families constitute it. While somewhat constrained politically, the private sector is nonetheless quite large. The Gulf states are competing to create free trade zones, attract foreign direct investment (and, increasingly, portfolio investment), carve niches in particular economic sectors, and reform their business rules and practices to make business processes simpler and cheaper. Yet, the

private sector operates only in certain areas of the economy, usually with the blessing of the political elite. It is not able to challenge the ultimate political authority, centrality, or stability of the state, nor is it usually able to compete with established business elites or the state's commercial interests. This makes the Gulf's state capitalist structure business- and market-friendly, but within a framework where the state controls the largest and most valuable sectors of the economy and its key firms.

This framework is obviously a force for elite consolidation and political stasis and also enhances the international role of these states. It gives the state a continual stream of income that, while variable, fluctuates less dramatically than rents and is more productively and labor-intensively generated than royalties. It suggests to society that the political elite are engaged in long-term thinking about the future, an economy beyond the energy sector, and the needs of citizens. It sustains business actors that are supportive of the state and the economic order and whose positions often remain at the mercy of the political elite. For society at large, the system is usually considered better than both statism and free market neoliberalism. If rentierism serves to provide the political elite with a stream of income with which to co-opt and repress a population into tolerating the political status quo, this new or dynamic state capitalism gives that same elite further influence into other parts of the economy. It justifies control, regulation, and influence in areas that otherwise appear as the exclusive domains of other actors. It places the state at the center of most strategic economic sectors—and often quite a few more—and gives the state enormous capacity to shape how various political actors and forces behave and interact. This, too, gives the state and the political and commercial elite strong incentives to seek political continuity and oppose substantive political change.

Development Strategies, Political Strategies, and Globalization

The political economy of the Gulf in the past few decades has also been marked by notable focus on socioeconomic development, selective but obvious engagement with globalization, and state-sponsored narratives that seek to manage any political or other opposition to economic change or to the political status quo. The Gulf monarchies now engage energetically—if selectively—with globalization, while acting to avoid negative repercussions from such significant change. They all have national development strategies, genuinely formulated if also politically informed.

Early rentier state theorists, in arguing that the state needed no economic policy or development plan,²⁸ were thus incorrect—Saudi Arabia has had a detailed 5-year development plan since its first, covering 1970–75²⁹—and could never mount such an argument now, given the breadth and detail of late rentier states’ policies on state spending, monetary policy, trade promotion, investment, post-industrial sectorial expansion strategies, and human resources.

The national development plans of the twenty-first-century Gulf are comprehensive and sophisticated. They include, as examples, the Qatar National Vision 2030,³⁰ the various Abu Dhabi urban plans published under the Vision 2030 rubric,³¹ 5-year development plans (the eighth covers 2011–15 inclusive), a 25-year Oman Vision 2020 plan,³² and others. All these plans feature long-term development goals and, in many cases, the promotion of national identity or social cohesion. Further evidence of long-term state thinking on development are the various development funds and long-term investments made by states, including those managed as sovereign wealth funds (SWFs). SWFs arguably are a characteristic of new state capitalism; they are state-held investment portfolio funds, funded by foreign exchange assets, that buy and hold domestic or international investments and which seek through these investments to earn risk-based returns.³³ They are important in the contemporary Gulf for the several political-economic goals that they serve, including creating the appearance for society of a state that is thinking about preserving wealth for the long-term; easing some of the problems of an over-reliance on resource rents by evening out variations in national income, inflation, and exchange rates; and providing the state with a long-term pool of money from which to fund social, economic, and other spending and, ultimately, that can help the regime manage politics.

Beyond, but linked to, such strategies has been the transformation of public spaces, economic infrastructure, and other major facilities. From malls to universities to museums, major buildings and public spaces are being ambitiously framed by regimes as locations that are at once traditional and national as well as global and even cosmopolitan. The examples of this are legion. In Qatar, the Museum of Islamic Art, designed by the world famous Chinese architect I. M. Pei, is based on traditional Islamic designs with precise geometric shapes and built sitting out over the water rather than in the city among tall, modern buildings. Yet, it also has a thoroughly modern feel, in parts sparse in its impression, and with its bright limestone not only geometrically precise but almost cubist. The design

sends an impression of both solid traditionalism and sharp, adaptable modernity—even postmodernity—most likely a deliberate attempt to represent a society, culture, and set of values that are in harmony with Islam and deep Arab and Gulf cultural traditions, yet which also embrace the necessities, luxuries, and new aspects of identity that come from engagement with the globalized contemporary world, its eclectic cultures, and its dynamic technologies. Given the building’s very conservative role—to hold, preserve, and display one of the world’s finest collections of Islamic art—the socio-cultural-political message behind the museum supports the state and regime. It is a representation of the dramatic economic and social transformation of Qatar under Emir Hamad (ruler 1995–2013), sending a message of modernism and openness to international visitors, but also implying to Qataris that even in the face of globalization and rapid social change, Qataris’ national identity, cultural traditions, and religious values must be preserved and are in safe hands.

Other arts and cultural initiatives, on which the state has spent massive sums, have been designed at least in part to contain the same promotional message, namely that Doha is “a cosmopolitan city where artists and patrons from both East and West mingle.”³⁴ Beyond this, major sporting events—the 2006 Asian Games, the 2022 Soccer World Cup—similarly have an underlying message that Qatar is a place where tradition is preserved and Islam esteemed, and yet which also happily and successfully embraces globalization, new technology, and multiculturalism.³⁵ Such events are, undeniably, designed in part for their development benefits³⁶ but, just as importantly, they are also political, stoking national pride and thereby reiterating the state’s historical and nationalist claims of legitimacy.³⁷ For most Qataris, the message is well received,³⁸ aligning with their desires for a strong national image abroad.

Along similarly interesting lines—if very different in nature—are Bahrain’s museums, specifically its oil museum, Dar al-Naft, and its museum of Islamic calligraphy, Bayt al-Qur’an. The museums reinforce nationalism and national identity, both especially important given the cleavages created by Bahrain’s Sunni dynasty in a population that is around 70% Shi’a, a division highlighted and reinforced by the 2011 uprisings and by the broader challenges to King Hamad’s legitimacy from Bahrainis angry at his unfulfilled promises of political reform. The oil museum is a deliberate attempt to remind Bahrainis of the wealth and opportunities delivered by oil; in fact, the museum is deliberately positioned near the highest point on the island and next to the country’s first oil well. The museum’s historical

narrative suggests that the Kingdom's oil income, dating to 1932, has been well spent on social and economic development, glossing over the uneven distribution in contemporary society. The implied message is, of course, that the country is modern and developed because its natural wealth has been utilized astutely and benevolently by the ruling dynasty, but it is also a reminder of the extensive development outcomes that have occurred regardless. At the same time, Bayt al-Qur'an is an assertion and reminder of the Islamic credentials of the ruling family. It goes beyond calligraphy, although that is its focus, to act as a research center and to offer narratives on the history of Islam, framed to stress the importance of religion socially as well as the religious credentials of the regime.³⁹

Qatar and Bahrain are only two Gulf monarchies, but all of them provide examples along such lines. When the two dynamics—the centrality of development strategies, and the meanings and roles of public spaces—are combined, they illustrate a deliberate but selective globalization by states seeking economic development and careful social change, yet little if any substantive political reform. The introversion that was a feature of the Gulf a few decades ago is now a thing of the past. Most of the Gulf is now open to trade and investment across a range of sectors and areas that were closed a generation ago. Most of the Gulf now encourages tourism rather than making it frightfully expensive, if not near-impossible, by backing national airlines that spur tourists into considering a visit. Gulf societies are changing noticeably in certain ways, which include through the impact of globalization. The adoption of selected aspects of a globalized lifestyle (whether broad tertiary education, travel, access to technology, or an appreciation for quality global brands) has increased, although globalization has also brought new societal concerns about the pace of Westernization or about the impact on identity and national values when citizens are, as in many Gulf states, a small minority of the total resident population.

The state's development strategies seek to address some of the underlying economic, and sometimes social, problems or risks that society may face, such as unemployment, youth dissatisfaction, or the sense that political elites may be distant from societal realities and out of touch. The more diverse an economy, the more stable it is, and the more that people can exploit genuine employment opportunities and chances for personal development. The alternative, a population frustrated by a sense of relative or intergenerational deprivation, contains substantial political threats for incumbent regimes. At the same time, an overly rapid or overeager embrace of globalization would contain its own grave risks if globalization

were to undermine traditional social relationships, destroy local commercial or community interests through the introduction of international competition, or corrode religious values through uncontrollable social change or, especially, by the introduction of an overpowering secularization or Westernization. Therefore, the creation of public spaces, infrastructure and cultural settings that are at once “traditional” and in accord with societal values (or what these are claimed to be), yet simultaneously “modern” or even global in their message, is intended at least in part to sedate such anxieties and allay their risks to the state and the ruling elite. Development strategies and public architecture and symbolism represent two sides of the regime maintenance coin; they are an attempt to globalize selectively and on the state’s terms, gaining many of the perceived economic, technological, and even social benefits of globalization and integration with the outside world, while also ensuring that the regime that accepts globalization is not dethroned by it. It is, in large part, an attempt by the Gulf monarchies to positively and efficaciously resolve, “the king’s dilemma.”

What of Other Factors?

The three main dynamics outlined above are the dominant explanatory structures for the Gulf states’ political economies, but other lesser factors play a related role as well. The first is that regimes remain highly personalized, and leaders invariably construct elite networks and other interpersonal ties through which they manage the flow of resources and communicate with society. Neopatrimonialism provides a very convincing lens through which to explain this dynamic. It argues that a ruler or other political leader is at the center of an elite web, with subordinate elites that are clients of the leader.⁴⁰ These clients represent various institutions, organizations and societal units; they may include cabinet ministers, military chiefs, certain bureaucrats or state capitalists, and other state elites, as well as tribal figures, top clerics, and even intellectuals, artists, or other cultural producers. They feed information about the group or institution they represent up to their patron while also defending that patron to their constituencies, and in return receive opportunities, resources, and access to higher or new networks. At the same time, the leader encourages competition among these clients, keeping them anxious to retain their positions and checking any potential rival for power. This web of first-tier clients then build their own patron–client networks further down the system, out into the institutions and social units that they represent or where

they are imbedded. This personalizes politics—and may weaken institutions—but it is also an effective way for a leader or small ruling clique to manage the vast array of political actors and forces in a modern nation-state. Neopatrimonialism is entirely consistent with rentierism, state capitalism, and other features of the Gulf's political economies—in fact, it serves and strengthens them. For fairly obvious reasons, it is another force that dampens or blocks political liberalization and pressures for greater pluralism, as it blurs decision-making processes, reduces accountability, and weakens public political voice and agency.⁴¹ It is a useful framework, therefore, for explaining why rational-legal institutions in the Gulf exist, often appearing well funded and modern, and yet often lack transparency or equity. This in turn helps explain why the Gulf's political profile has been so static, even as globalization has transformed its economies.⁴²

Second, historical claims to legitimacy retain some importance, as do certain specific ruling tactics in particular states. Historical claims of legitimacy are used where a ruling dynasty has been entrenched in power for a long period and accepted by key elites, especially by clerics or merchants, over that time. The ruling Al Sabah dynasty in Kuwait often uses this case, claiming its rule to have been endorsed by the key merchant and notable families over a century ago and adding a few further historical myths and claims to strengthen the case.⁴³ The Qatari Al Thani family has also formulated narratives about their historical role on the Qatar peninsula as a claim to legitimacy.⁴⁴ The Al Saud dynasty in Saudi Arabia makes claims about history, heritage, and the identities of the past; as Madawi Al-Rasheed notes, this reaches the point of officializing an historiographical orthodoxy for the political purpose of positioning state and society relative to each other, enhancing regime legitimacy and, ultimately, building popular loyalty to the Al Saud-dominated political order.⁴⁵

Finally, state strategies of national “branding” may serve domestic political purposes. Qatar, of course, has famously constructed a consistent and branded message that it is a small, wealthy, and ambitious state seeking to have a disproportionate influence on regional political discourse, economic development, and stability.⁴⁶ This branding serves a domestic purpose and ultimately serves political economy outcomes⁴⁷ by making the royal family wealthier, creating new commercial opportunities for society, and as a “high modernism”⁴⁸ that serves the ruling regime by creating and sustaining a population more subservient and dependent upon the state than would emerge organically in a more mixed or less rentier economy. Other states may brand themselves in less overt or very different ways, but

they do so nonetheless. Saudi Arabia, for example, fosters the image of its state as the conservative Sunni guardian of Islam's two holiest cities, while weaving into such narratives other messages such as the risks stemming from disunity, tribalism, and secular political ideologies.⁴⁹ In almost direct contrast, Dubai presents itself at times as a hedonistic tourist destination, but more widely as a commercially focused, dynamic business and investment hub for the Gulf.⁵⁰ While the hedonistic aspect of this message may be a risk in the traditional domestic cultural setting, given that Dubai's small citizenry are socially conservative, the strong commercial emphasis of the message, with the high-end focus of its tourism and investment strategies, and the practical advantages bestowed on Dubai's citizens, offsets such risks quite decidedly.

THE LIMITED PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL CHANGE AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

While the possibility of dramatic, unexpected change cannot be discounted—as the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings reminded observers—the basis of the Gulf states' political economies, centered on factors that sustain or encourage a political status quo, make the prospects for deep or meaningful political change very limited. A political economy based on deeply entrenched, allocative states (i.e. a rentier system), gives states and political elites a powerful co-optive and repressive capacity, which most cannot resist the temptation to employ in the service of sustaining the political status quo. When the state and its elite also possess a commanding position as owner and regulator in the economy and have in place a deliberate strategy for selective engagement with the international economic system, then political change—especially substantive change—is nearly always going to come as a gift from the political leadership and with very strict limits on how much it may impact the highest political levels. Reform in actuality often masks a strategy of regime maintenance and exists to evade deeper systemic change.

That noted, some changes do take place in these systems. Rentierism or state capitalism are not completely deterministic, the systems in which they occur are not entirely static, nor are regime elites at the summit of institutionally weak states the only actors with the capacity for political agency. The most obvious reason for this is that the state is never truly autonomous from society. Rents buy a state—more precisely, the political elite—a large degree of freedom from accountability to, reciprocity toward, or negotiation with society. Yet, the threat of revolution remains

a real one, along with the potential for less-emphatic political unrest. A rentier system, after all, will favor particular groups and ensconce many already-privileged elites. This may foster a sense of relative deprivation, or resentment at perceived inequalities, in even the wealthiest economies. The Arab uprisings, including the substantial 2011 uprising in Bahrain and the more modest protests in parts of Oman, were a reminder to leaders not to ignore such threats to their rule. The uprisings were also a reminder of the fundamental reliance of the Gulf's leaders on rentierism: the Saudi regime's urgent financial packages in February and March 2011 were the largest such reminder, with over US\$100 billion promised in these two announcements alone, but Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain also announced new spending at the time and other rulers offered largesse or other forms of co-optation to their peoples.⁵¹

Beyond this rentier arrangement, society also looks for ways to both engage with the state, and at times to counter it and try to extract political or social concessions that the leadership would rather not grant. Regardless of their relative repressiveness, all Gulf monarchies are regimes of the softer authoritarian type, and in preferring agreement or co-optation to repression where possible, will often respond to the need for reform with greater consultation among their elite networks, or even arrange a small expansion of that network. Where wider concessions are required, they are very often possible without undermining the structure of power, and sometimes are even attractive to leaderships. Social reform, politically meaningful as it sometimes may be, is arguably easier for a regime to accept than more direct political liberalization or pluralization. Oftentimes, as a result, one of the first signs of a state response to societal pressure for reform is a simple easing of social freedoms: greater freedom in the business press or other specialist media, more space for public debate and discussion of sensitive issues, or a less oppressive feel to the state's manifestations in societal spaces are common. Certain societal actors and forces play key roles in this regard. Businesspeople may be consulted by the political leadership more frequently or on a greater range of matters, perhaps including on issues beyond commercial ones. In most Gulf monarchies, business plays such a role, albeit to varying degrees. In the UAE, as one author notes, key merchants are informally consulted on political as well as commercial matters, and the linkages and interests across merchants and the ruling family are deeply embedded and their roles interrelated, with royals often dabbling in business and key businesspeople regularly appointed to official roles.⁵² This occurs across all six Gulf monarchies, most famously in Kuwait and

Saudi Arabia. Very different groups than businesspeople—artists, writers, poets, film-makers, and other cultural producers—may similarly be loosely consulted or given new but limited freedoms in or through their work. In fact, the indirect but strong political reach and respected role of the arts means that politics is very often contested, robustly if often unobtrusively, through those media.⁵³

Separately, states may respond to the pressure for political reform by appearing to endorse and instigate it. This can be part of what Daniel Brumberg has called “pluralized autocracy,”⁵⁴ sometimes called “illiberal”⁵⁵ democracy. In such a system, the state settles into a permanent mode of pluralized but not democratic or transitional rule. Ultimately, the “trade-mark mixture of guided pluralism, controlled elections, and selective repression...is not just a ‘survival strategy’ adopted by authoritarian regimes, but rather a *type* of political system whose institutions, rules, and logic defy any linear model of democratization.”⁵⁶ In Bahrain, the population has long demanded political reform, but sectarianism has arguably made such faux reform attractive to the ruling Sunni dynasty. The tactics pursued by King Hamad after gaining the throne in 1999 appear to constitute pluralized autocracy: after promising reform upon reaching power, he soon delivered a far more modest and orchestrated set of changes. In the particular case of the legislature, a gerrymandered lower house and an appointed upper house meant that Sunni dominance of the legislative agenda was ensured.⁵⁷ Such pluralized autocracy is used as a controlled outlet for popular frustration and perhaps as a basic level of consultation (or the appearance of such), while real liberalization or transition are very unlikely to occur.

A related strategy is what is sometimes called “calculated political decompression” or something similar. It is a false democratization, done on the margins of the system in a very gradual manner. The liberalization of local politics is an example, where the introduction of competitive elections can be used as an excuse to avoid more substantial and national-level political reforms. The municipal electoral process introduced in Saudi Arabia as of 2005 arguably is an example,⁵⁸ although the extension of voting to women, as proposed for the 2015 poll, may seem to make local politics more consequential. “Decompression” argues that such changes ease reform pressure, creating an opportunity for popular participation while postponing—perhaps avoiding—weightier political change. Rarely does such a strategy reach national institutional level, and where it does, such as with the introduction of new legislatures or greater legislative powers, the process is tightly engineered. The introduction of an elected legislature in

the UAE in 2006 is probably a case, and the abovementioned legislative reforms in Bahrain as of the 2002 polls almost certainly partially served this purpose. In Qatar, just the promise of the introduction of a parliament seems to have been used toward such ends, since the promise has been made and then action on it postponed twice since the late 1990s.

In some ways, it might be argued that any change is, regardless of its intent, still change and thus still of a certain consequence. The Gulf is a sub-region where quite substantial change can occur, but usually cautiously, led from above but negotiated carefully with a wider set of elites. The Gulf political economies have changed markedly in recent decades, from relatively closeted, protectionist places to ones far more dynamic and engaged with the international economy. Yet, at the same time, the political order has changed far less significantly. A few new elites have appeared, such as a more dynamic generation of state capitalists and, noticeably, some key female managers and entrepreneurs, but ruling dynasties remain as entrenched as ever, and more traditional elites such as clerics, tribal leaders, and merchants have not had to surrender much power or opportunity to create the space for these newcomers. Royals continue to dominate the Gulf states' politics, and usually occupy many of the top positions not only in the state but also in business and civil society organizations. Thus it has long been, and is likely to remain—at least as long as the Gulf's political economies share the features they do; in other words, for as long as ruling families enjoy rentier wealth and new state capitalist structures, which deliver the co-optive, repressive, and regulatory capacity to fend off pressures for political change.

NOTES

1. Clement M. Henry and Robert Springborg, *Globalization and the Politics of Development in the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 168–71.
2. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968, p. 191, cited and quoted in *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*, Michael Herb. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999, p. 1.
3. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, pp. 177–91, cited in Michael Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977, pp. 166–8.
4. Hudson, *Arab Politics*, p. 168.

5. Fred Halliday, *Arabia without Sultans*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974, pp. 25–9, 508–10.
6. Michael Field, *Inside the Arab World*. London: John Murray, 1994, pp. 91–111.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 108–11.
8. This point is made in Matthew Gray, “A tale of two Middle Easts: Change and stasis in the Arab World.” *Griffith Asia Quarterly* 1, no. 2/3 (2013), pp. 51–76, www104.griffith.edu.au/index.php/gaq/article/view/410 (accessed 5 August 2014).
9. Henry and Springborg, *Globalization and the Politics of Development*, pp. 170–1, 192–3.
10. The most recent example of this is Christopher M. Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*. London: Hurst, 2012.
11. Michael Herb is a key proponent of such arguments, which emphasize the importance of a ruling dynasty’s historical role and legitimacy as a force for stasis, and institutional weakness or systemic barriers as a constraint on the prospects for political reform. See as examples Herb, *All in the Family*, especially pp. 235–54, and on institutional issues, Michael Herb, “Princes, parliaments, and the prospects for democracy in the Gulf.” In *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance*, Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michele Penner Angrist ed. pp. 169–91. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005.
12. A range of non-oil arguments about the Gulf states’ political economies and state–society arrangements have been made, for example in Sean Foley, *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2010.
13. Giacomo Luciani, “Allocation vs. production states: A theoretical framework.” In *The Arab State*, Giacomo Luciani ed. pp. 65–84. London: Routledge, 1990, at p. 72.
14. These early works include: Hussein Mahdavy, “The patterns and problems of economic development in rentier states: The case of Iran.” In *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*, M. A. Cook ed. pp. 428–67. London: Oxford University Press, 1970, which was the first work to propose rentier state theory in the sense meant by the RST literature that followed, as well as Hazem Beblawi, “The rentier state in the Arab world.” In *The Rentier State: Nation, State and the Integration of the Arab World*, Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani ed. pp. 63–82. London: Croom Helm, 1987; and Luciani, “Allocation vs. production states.”
15. Luciani, “Allocation vs. production states,” pp. 71–2.
16. Matthew Gray, “A theory of ‘late rentierism’ in the Arab states of the Gulf.” Occasional Paper No. 7. Doha: Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in

- Qatar, 2011; Matthew Gray, *Qatar: Politics and the Challenges of Development*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013, pp. 8–10, 53–5.
17. “Saudi king offers benefits as he returns from treatment.” *BBC News*, February 23, 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12550326 (accessed August 6, 2014).
 18. One of the best works on population, unemployment, and associated issues is Paul Rivlin, *Arab Economies in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, especially pp. 7–35, which focuses on demographic issues, although the book overall has a central argument based on population pressures and other demographic dynamics. The unsustainability of an increasing Gulf population is noted in, among other sources, Mari Luomi, *The Gulf Monarchies and Climate Change: Abu Dhabi and Qatar in an Era of Natural Unsustainability*. London: Hurst, 2012, pp. 15–31, 83–5, 148–9, but especially and Gulf-wide 27–31; and Monica Malik and Tim Niblock, “Saudi Arabia’s economy: The challenge of reform.” In *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman ed. pp. 85–110. London: Hurst, 2005, at p. 103.
 19. This is a theme of Foley, *The Arab Gulf States*.
 20. This is one of several pertinent points made in Suzanne Maloney, “The Gulf’s renewed oil wealth: Getting it right this time?” *Survival* 50, no. 6 (2008), 129–50, at p. 133.
 21. Of several works on the topic and using this term, the major piece is Ian Bremmer, *The End of the Free Market: Who Wins the War Between States and Corporations?* New York: Portfolio, 2010.
 22. *Ibid.*, pp. 51–81.
 23. On this see, for example, Steffen Hertog, “Defying the resource curse: Explaining successful state-owned enterprises in rentier states.” *World Politics* 62, no. 2 (April 2010), pp. 261–301; and Steffen Hertog, “Lean and mean: The new breed of state-owned enterprises in the Gulf monarchies.” In *Industrialization in the Gulf: A Socioeconomic Revolution*, Jean-François Seznec and Mimi Kirk ed. pp. 17–29. London: Routledge, 2011.
 24. Martin Hvidt, “The Dubai model: An outline of key development-process elements in Dubai.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 3 (2009), pp. 397–418, at p. 410.
 25. Giacomo Luciani, “From private sector to national bourgeoisie: Saudi Arabian business.” In *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman ed. pp. 144–81. London: Hurst, 2005, at p. 146.
 26. Bremmer, *The End of the Free Market*, pp. 67–9.
 27. Luciani, “From private sector to national bourgeoisie.”
 28. Luciani, “Allocation vs. production states,” p. 76.

29. Tim Niblock with Monica Malik, *The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia*. London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 52–82.
30. *Qatar National Vision 2030*. Doha: General Secretariat for Development Planning, July 2008.
31. For details see the various pages published by the Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council, marked *Abu Dhabi 2030* or *Abu Dhabi Capital 2030*, www.upc.gov.ae/abu-dhabi-2030.aspx?lang=en-US (accessed August 19, 2014).
32. On the Omani plan, see Alfred Strolla and Phaninder Peri, “Oman 20/20 Vision.” *A Middle East Point of View* (Fall 2013), www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/xs/Documents/About-Deloitte/mepovdocuments/mepov12/dtme_mepov12_Oman2020vision.pdf (accessed August 19, 2014).
33. Xu Yi-chong, “The political economy of sovereign wealth funds.” In *The Political Economy of Sovereign Wealth Funds*, Xu Yi-chong and Gawdat Bahgat ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 3–7.
34. “Increased momentum.” *The Report: Qatar 2011*. London: Oxford Business Group, 2011, p. 229.
35. See Gray, *Qatar*, pp. 160–6, 170–80.
36. Mahfoud Amara, “2006 Qatar Asian games: A ‘modernization’ project from above?” *Sport in Society* 8, no. 3 (2005), pp. 493–514.
37. Allen J. Fromherz, *Qatar: A Modern History*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2012, pp. 12–15, 17–21, 158–61.
38. Hugh Eakin, “The strange power of Qatar.” *New York Review of Books* 58, no. 16 (October 27, 2011), www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/oct/27/strange-power-qatar/?page=1 (accessed August 19, 2014).
39. Ni’mah Isma’il Nawwab and Hussain A. Al-Ramadan, “Beit Al Qur’an: Religion, art, scholarship.” *Saudi Aramco World* 51, no. 3 (May/June 2000), pp. 24–31.
40. What follows is drawn from James A. Bill and Robert Springborg, *Politics in the Middle East*, 3rd edn. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman/Little, Brown Higher Education, 1990, pp. 152–61, although a range of sources discuss neopatrimonial dynamics in the region.
41. Gero Erdmann and Ulf Engel, “Neopatrimonialism revisited – Beyond a catch-all concept.” Working Paper 16/2006. Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies, February 2006, pp. 17–20. repec.giga-hamburg.de/pdf/giga_06_wp16_erdmann-engel.pdf (accessed April 18, 2011).
42. Oliver Schlumberger, “Structural reform, economic order, and development: Patrimonial capitalism.” *Review of International Political Economy* 15, no. 4 (2008), pp. 622–49.
43. Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 20–2, 36.

44. Fromherz, *Qatar: A Modern History*, pp. 17–19.
45. Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 182–92.
46. Gray, *Qatar*, pp. 160–6.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–13, 160–6.
48. Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013, pp. 153–64.
49. Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 183–90.
50. There are a range of sources on Dubai's branding and national image strategy. See, for example, Melodena Stephens Balakrishnan, "Dubai – A star in the east: A case study in strategic destination branding." *Journal of Place Management and Development* 1, no. 1 (2008), pp. 62–91; William Coombe and Jad Melki, "Global media and brand Dubai." *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 8, no. 1 (February 2012), pp. 58–71; and for the wider strategic setting of branding, Hvidt, "The Dubai model."
51. Rex Brynen, Pete W. Moore, Bassel F. Salloukh and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, eds. *Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism & Democratization in the Arab World*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012, pp. 186–8.
52. See the outline and discussion of this in Khalid Almezaini, "Private sector actors in the UAE and their role in the process of economic and political reform." In *Business Politics in the Middle East*, Steffen Hertog, Giacomo Luciani, and Marc Valeri ed. pp. 43–66. London: Hurst, 2013.
53. Even though he does not discuss the Gulf monarchies in detail, this point is made well in Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 256–319.
54. See Daniel Brumberg, "The trap of liberalized autocracy." *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 4 (2002), pp. 56–68.
55. The term "illiberal democracy" was coined in Fareed Zakaria, "The rise of illiberal democracy." *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November–December 1997), pp. 22–43.
56. Brumberg, "The trap of liberalized autocracy," p. 56, emphasis in original.
57. Daniel Brumberg, "Beyond liberalization?" *Wilson Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2004), pp. 47–55, at p. 49.
58. For this type of argument see, for example, Abdulaziz H. Al-Fahad, "Ornamental constitutionalism: The Saudi basic law of governance." *Yale Journal of International Law* 30, no. 2 (2005), pp. 375–96, especially pp. 384–9.

PART II

Islamism and Sectarian Politics

Islam, Islamism, Muslims, and Governance: Beyond “Islam and Democracy”

Hisham Hellyer

Over the past several decades, a multitude of articles, papers, books, and other publications have addressed the theme of “Islam and democracy.”¹ In 2015, however, to devote any piece of work to that theme is somewhat provocative. The subject has admittedly become somewhat boring and, to a certain degree, fairly nonsensical. The issue of whether or not Islam (a world faith) and democracy (a political process and mode of governance) are compatible has hopefully been put to rest some time ago. The framing of the discussion has become sufficiently problematized that it renders the framing itself incorrect, at least from an optimistic perspective. The question is not *if* Islam (or, indeed, any world faith) can engage with a political process such as democracy. Rather, the more important issue to explore is *how* they engage with each other, depending on the context of time and space.

That is by no means an insignificant semantic difference. Indeed, it hits at the crux of the matter, as informed observers and analysts are forced to question how they actually assess a variety of political ideological movements. Are political movements to be judged according to certain standards, milestones, and principles? Or, as the “Islam and democracy” frame seems to imply, should they be judged in reference to the question of “is Islam democratic” or “compatible” with democracy? Islam, it deserves repeating, is a world religion; it operates on very different levels and fields compared to political ideologies, even, it must be said, when political ideologies claim to be inspired by religious ideas.

There are those within the Muslim world who have taken on the task of examining the differences between religion and ideology, at least in the classical sense of what “religion” and what “ideology” actually are. For example, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas of Kuala Lumpur, through his “Islamic Worldview” project, delineated one strand of thought dedicated to this theme, as elaborated in his *Islam and Secularism and Prolegomena*,² which offers some further thoughts on the topic. For this chapter however, it ought to suffice to say that Islam is a religion, while political ideologies and political parties are quite different.

This distinction allows the discussion to be narrowed quite significantly. Some argue that rather than talk about the compatibility of *Islam* and democracy, it is more useful to discuss the compatibility of certain religiously inspired *parties* and democracy. A variety of such parties fit within this discourse: the Ennahda Party of Tunisia, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood movement; the Freedom and Justice Party of Egypt, the political wing of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood³; Hamas, the Palestinian version of the Muslim Brotherhood; and other examples within other Muslim majority countries. There are also newer developments, such as the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Turkey, and even some civil political movements that exist within non-Muslim majority countries where demographically minor Muslim communities reside. In various different ways, these vastly dissimilar movements and parties seek to influence the political sphere. They are often described in ideological language as “Islamist” movements—a term they often apply to themselves, particularly in the Arabic language (*islamiyyun*). Does the discussion become, then, how Islamism and democracy are—or are not—compatible?

It is certainly a better question than whether Islam and democracy are compatible. Islam is a religion, while Islamism is a political representation of different interpretations of Islam. Indeed, it is difficult to speak of a single Islamism—rather than many “Islamisms.” There is certainly no “normative” Islamism in the same way that scholars or analysts historically discuss a “normative” Islam, depending on whether the focus is on Sunni and Shi’a Islam. Before addressing the central question, it is important to consider a few points vis-à-vis this modern phenomenon of Islamism, especially some tensions in that regard—most easily done by relating to the terms that often abound in contemporary discourse, the “Islamic state,” in particular.

For many reasons, this author does not use the term “Islamic state” in any of his work. Some elaboration of the terms, however, may be of use.

The first is historical—which relates to the “state” part of the “Islamic state”—and the second is more philosophical—the “Islamic” part. With regard to the former, historians of traditional Muslim societies frequently note that use of the word “state” is a very modern construction, which does not easily transplant into descriptions of Muslim societies. When Islamist political movements speak of the “Islamic state” as their goal—and as an achievement that has previously existed in Muslim history—that is not historically the case. There was governance, of course, but the idea of a “state” that is similar to modern state structures (which indeed is what Islamists are talking about) is very modern—thus their references are not historically valid at all. There are quite a few Muslim political philosophers today that point this out, but the Islamist movements generally do not even explore this with any degree of seriousness. Al-Attas has looked at these themes, as has Abdel-wahab El-Affendi.⁴ What remains crucial for Muslim political philosophers that are truly interested in examining notions not only of Muslim autonomy in terms of their physical presence in the world but also via their ideas in the international arena is to examine precisely what “the state” actually means for Islamic political philosophy. The engagement thus far simply grafts the notion of “state” onto pre-modern concepts of authority and leadership, and political science makes it clear that the modern state is far more than that. The question is how it is different, and what factors may or may not be congruent. There have been feminist critiques of the state, such as those offered by John Hoffman,⁵ but similar explorations by Muslim political philosophers have not been forthcoming. Indeed, the rise of the Dai’sh phenomenon, which purports to have created an “Islamic state,” is partly possible due to the absence of discussion within the Arab world around the philosophical notion of statehood. The “Islamic State” is modeled, after all, far more on the modern “state” model.

In this regard, some differences arise regarding Turkey, because the intellectual heritage of the AKP, in terms of not only political history but also approaches to religion, is very different from that of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Arab Islamist movements that have their roots within the Brotherhood.⁶ Their respective capacities, therefore, for coming up with intriguing answers to these difficult questions around religion and governance are thus quite different.

A corollary problem requiring identification and elaboration thus emerges: is Islamism merely the political representation of Islam? In other words, is Islamism actually “political Islam” or “Islam in politics?” If the

answer to this question is yes, then the parallel conclusion must be that Islamism is the political representation of normative Islam. Yet, this is a very difficult claim to make without exploring further. Iranian Islamism, for example, is not a political representation of an interpretation of Shi'a Islam that all Shi'a is found normative. Indeed, many Shi'a is regarded as the very basis of Iranian Islamism, with its concept of *velayat-i faqih*, to be wholly *non*-normative. In the Sunni Muslim world, the intellectual inheritance of Islamism in the Indian subcontinent, with its roots in the works and efforts of Abul A'la Maududi, is a wholly different inheritance than that of the Muslim Brotherhood movement. One can speak of different branches of the Muslim Brotherhood phenomenon, but they are offshoots of the same movement. It is difficult to make that same case for all types of Islamism.

Moreover, it ought to be noted, historically normative Islam has not generally given rise to political representations—that is, to Islamism. This is not to say that it might not—indeed, it is likely that at some point in the future, normative Islamic thought will give rise to political theologies for the contemporary world, even if those ideas and arguments are contested. The Arab revolutionary uprisings will increasingly make this a difficult topic to avoid.

Nevertheless, when Islamism is discussed today, it is invariably a political representation of a *non*-normative religious interpretation. The Muslim Brotherhood, for example, is the political representation of the modernist Salafi intellectual inheritance in Egypt, which finds its roots in the thought of Hassan al-Banna, Rashid Rida, and Muhammad Abduh.⁷ The modernist Salafi movement arose precisely as a reaction to the more historically normative Azhari tradition.⁸ Indeed, no political ideology based on the Azhari tradition has materialized in Egypt. The political ideologies that *have* arisen are political interpretations of other movements, such as the purist Salafis (the Nour Party) or the modernist Salafis (the Muslim Brotherhood). Certainly, this is one of the criticisms of these movements by the Azhari establishment⁹—that they are political ideologies that are somehow besmirching religion. Bluntly stated, much of the tension regarding the Brotherhood (and far more so toward the Salafi political movements) in places like Egypt, Syria, and Libya comes not simply from a suspicion of the politicization of religion, but also from a suspicion of the approach to religion itself within those Islamist circles.

This sort of tension is intensified by the exceedingly intense and divisive discourse coming from supporters of the Brotherhood in places like

Egypt, where political conflicts are cast as cosmic battles between good and evil, with one side heading for hell and another for heaven. This sort of approach from the Muslim Brotherhood, long held to be the mainstream of the Islamist movement and thus, at least relatively speaking, a moderate group, has taken many by surprise. While such discourse might have existed privately among certain sectors of the group, the Brotherhood's public engagement, particularly when engaging internationally, was far more similar to a democratic discourse than it was to a reified, essentialist diatribe based on religious symbolism. Yet, in Egypt from 2011 onward, both types of discourse could be identified, leading to questions around which viewpoints were truly dominant within the movement.

The critique of the Muslim Brotherhood as a political movement based in religion—which thus inevitably besmirches religion—is likely to become more difficult for the Azhari establishment to hold to for two reasons. First, as previously mentioned, it is likely that normative Sunni thinkers, who lay claim to the same normative intellectual inheritance as the Azhar, Al-Azhar, will introduce political theories based on that inheritance in years to come, whether in Libya or in Syria, where a dearth of political life will at some point necessitate it. This will be supremely interesting to look for in the coming years, because, as yet, we have not seen the ultimate settling of new, post-uprising political ideological formations, although these are most likely to occur sooner in Libya and Syria than in Egypt or Tunisia. A key aspect of these new formations will revolve around an innovative way of looking at religion in politics—a new way that will owe little to the Brotherhood or Salafi approaches—and which may help create a new centrism in these countries, and perhaps more broadly beyond the region.

Second, Azhari scholars themselves have engaged increasingly in political life, in acutely partisan fashions. Certainly, though, for the time being, the majority of normative Sunni authorities will probably continue to be suspicious of partisan political Islamist presences in the political sphere, even while a number of them might simultaneously be active in the political sphere with the goal of legitimizing the political order they believe to be necessary for their interests.

Returning to the central question, however; would it be sensible to then raise the further question of are *Islamist* parties democratic? In addressing this enquiry, further issues arise. The first is that, as was already made clear, there are a plethora of Islamist political forces, and they are indeed different from one another. Some of them may be more acutely tuned to democratic norms (if those can even be agreed upon) than others.

Until fairly recently, for example, the AKP in Turkey was described as very democratic. In recent years, however, many analysts seem to identify increasingly authoritarian tendencies emerging from the party. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was described in some quarters as a “moderate, democratic” Islamist force prior to Muslim Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi’s rule,¹⁰ but that description was soon called into question after Morsi’s government exhibited various non-democratic tendencies. Since there are different types of Islamist forces, they ought to be treated independently of each other as they are assessed.

A second issue is the need to assess *non*-Islamist forces within these same countries. Many of them can certainly be found wanting when evaluated for democratic credentials—perhaps for different reasons—but there is certainly plenty of evidence to suggest that the democratic quotient is lacking across the board in Muslim majority countries. Any analysis, therefore, of Islamist parties in such countries must also assess the democratic qualities of non-Islamist—but still Muslim—political parties in the same localities.

WHAT DO MUSLIMS ACTUALLY WANT FROM ISLAM IN POLITICS?

Beyond the issues around assessing Islamist political parties and their proclivities to democracy, there exists a deeper question. Often, the argument has been made that Islamist parties are “centrist” within Muslim majority countries and that the default position of Muslim communities is to be Islamist. In comparison, others imply that in Muslim majority countries, it is only Islamist political parties that desire religion in the public sphere. Which of these postulates might be more accurate, or is there more to it than this? Do such observations go beyond those sections of Muslim societies? What do Muslim populations actually want from Islam in terms of politics?

It is difficult, if not impossible, to accurately elaborate on this theme with regard to all Muslim communities. Doing justice to such a diverse set of communities is difficult indeed, and as such, for the purposes of this chapter, discussion shall remain focused on Egypt, one of the more significant modern cases. The ousting of President Morsi by the military and the interim government’s resolve to rewrite the 2012 constitution, which later resulted in another constitution in 2014, raised many questions about the use of religion in public life.¹¹ The head of the Coptic

Church, Pope Tawadros II, asked for a change to the wording of an article relating to religious rules, while the Grand Mufti, Shawqi Allam, announced his rejection of the idea of a theocratic state.¹² On the other hand, Mohamed Abu al-Ghar, a constituent assembly member from the Social Democrats, a non-Islamist political party, has separately advocated that Islamic law ought to have a role in legislation—this appears to be a matter of consensus.

Did—and do—Egyptians want religion to have a role in the public arena and, if so, what sort of role? These questions are difficult to accurately answer beyond all doubts, but some scientific data provide some signals. The Gallup Organization¹³ conducted a number of surveys in this area—some of the only face-to-face, nationally representative studies were carried out in the country since 2005. There have also been nationally representative surveys carried out by a consortium of Egyptian, American, and British institutions and analysts on these questions, the TahrirTrends consortium.¹⁴

The data has generally confirmed a trend that shows Egyptians' conservative religious attitudes, while nevertheless exhibiting skepticism toward political parties that declare a monopoly on religion. In general, Egyptians are a conservative people, and religion is a fundamental part of their identity; this is true whether they are Muslim or Christian. Recurring surveys done by Gallup and now TahrirTrends over the past 3 years indicate how Egyptians are clear about their identification with religion. Ninety-eight percent of those surveyed by TahrirTrends considered religion to be “very important” on a day-to-day level, and the remainder said “somewhat important.”¹⁵ This is very similar to separate data shown by Gallup in recent years.¹⁶

While these feelings indicate an affinity to religion as an identity marker, they do not necessarily indicate support for a specific political role for religion, or support for specific Islamist political parties. Without further data to support such suppositions, religious conservatism might be conflated with support for Islamism, which is misleading in the Egyptian context. As noted, Egyptians tend to be religiously conservative, but they are not necessarily Islamist.

The two main political Islamist groupings in Egypt (the Freedom and Justice Party of the largely modernist Salafi group of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Nour Party of the purist Salafis) are often described in terms of their differences with the mainstream orthopraxis of the Azhar tradition in Egypt, as previously noted. They differ on a number of varying levels, including religious and methodological approach to the Islamic canon, and attitudes to political engagement.¹⁷

Activists from both of those groups have nevertheless entered Al-Azhar University as students and faculty staff. In the main, however, the Al-Azhar establishment's leadership is generally opposed to both the modernist Salafi trend as well as the purist one. Under Morsi's tenure, this sort of tension became quite evident. This is not to say that tensions do not also exist within the Azhari establishment and its adherence to a mainstream tradition, particularly with regard to the nature of the relationship between the Al-Azhar and the state. Here, too, there are differences between quietists who advocate acquiescing to the state and those opposed to legitimizing the power of the state instead of calling power to account, a position that has great precedent in the scholastic tradition.

Such differences matter because religious conservatism in Egypt, which accounts for large swathes of the population, is linked more to the historical expression of Islam as exemplified by the Al-Azhar than to the modern political expressions of the Muslim Brotherhood and the various Salafi movements.¹⁸ When Gallup surveyed Egyptians in December 2011, it found that 95% of Egyptians had confidence in the Al-Azhar.¹⁹ When TahrirTrends asked a similar question in May/June 2013, the results indicated that 91% of Egyptians had either a great deal of confidence (79%) or some confidence (12%) in religious institutions, in general.²⁰

These views have repercussions for the evolving role of religion in the public arena, where the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist forces might find themselves under a certain amount of pressure, with no corollary effect on or from the religious conservatism of Egyptians.²¹ Meanwhile, it is interesting to recall that in polling done when Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was Defense Minister, he was regarded as a religious conservative,²² while not an Islamist. As such, he is likely to have respect for the religious institutions of Egypt, while not necessarily being sympathetic to any Islamist political party.

These sorts of discussions became more relevant as the interim government's roadmap sought to amend Egypt's constitution, with specific articles possibly pertaining to religion in politics. In particular, the suggestion of constitutionally banning political parties with a "religious reference" (the phrase used in Egyptian political discourse) was to be proposed for consideration during the constitutional amendment process. It is difficult to see, however, how such an article would be implemented, and how a definition of "religious reference" could be delineated in a country that is indelibly imbued with religion. Indeed, the state's narrative is itself supported in the public arena at present through the instrumentalization

of religion by some religious personalities linked to Al-Azhar. If parties established with a “religious reference” were allowed to form, and continued to use the same sort of language, would they be subjected to these restrictions?

If religious parties were subject to a ban, their leaders could easily circumvent such an article by simply masking their arguments in the language of non-religious rational, nationalistic discourse. Of course, that may indeed be the point. From all indications, the interim government is not interested in removing religion from the public arena or from the state. Politicians at all levels still utilize religious vocabulary, be it the interim President, the Prime Minister or the Defense Minister. Al-Azhar is a state institution and there is a *fatwa*-issuing institution under the authority of the Ministry of Justice.

Instead, the type of secularism that the Egyptian authorities want to institute is not one in which there is a sharp separation between the state and religion, or even politics and religion. But it may very well be one where there is a clear distinction between political parties and religion. That might be difficult to police and enforce, as already noted—not least of all due to the vagueness of what the authorities seem to want.

The clearest indication of this government vision may have come from the former Vice President Mohammad ElBaradei when he spoke on this issue during an interview on the Hayah television channel in the summer of 2013. At the time, he explicitly exhibited no opposition to the involvement of the Freedom and Justice Party or the Nour Party, but he did reject parties established “on the basis” of religion. It may have been a subtle point, but it had currency. A party with a “religious reference” may not particularly be the root of any controversy, but as far as ElBaradei is concerned, politicians from such religious-reference parties should not speak in the “name of God” or the “name of Islam.” Their speech is not “holy”—they are worldly political arguments. That distinction may be lost outside Egypt, but represents a feeling that has been expressed in various media within Egypt.

How does this relate, then, to Egyptian sensitivities regarding religious-based parties? Or perhaps going a step further: how does it relate to religious leaders who engage in legislative matters? When in late May/early June Egyptians were asked, “regardless of whether or not you would support them, do you think parties based primarily on religious identity, regardless of the religion involved, are a good idea?” Sixty-five percent of Egyptians said it would be a bad idea—only 31% said it would be a good

idea.²³ On the societal level, a broad majority of Egyptians would prefer not to have such parties. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that they would support legislation that banned such parties.

TahrirTrends also asked what Egyptians thought of the role that religious leaders should have in the writing of national legislation. The answers seem to confirm that, while Egyptians may indeed think very highly of religion as an identity marker, and respect religious institutions overwhelmingly, they do not necessarily translate this into support for providing religious leaders with a direct role in writing national laws to which they would all be subjected. When Gallup asked a similar question in 2011, shortly after the 25 January uprising, 69% of Egyptians said that religious leaders should advise those in authority with writing national legislation; 14% said they should have full authority in writing national legislation; 9% said no authority at all; and 8% either refused to answer the question or said they did not know.²⁴

Two years later when TahrirTrends asked its question, the results indicated a shift. Broadly speaking, around two-thirds of Egyptians did want religious leaders to advise those in authority with writing legislation (60%), although less than when Gallup conducted its poll in early 2011. The number of people, however, that said they should have no role at all, increased quite significantly from 9% to 23%. It is difficult to relate this change directly to the experience of Islamist rule per se, as the actual role of religious leaders in writing legislation did not change at all over the past few years. Nevertheless, it is clear that between 2011 and 2013, Egyptians began to somewhat reassess their feelings around the theoretical engagement of religious leaders in the legislative process.

The overall picture, therefore, of Egyptian attitudes vis-à-vis religion and the public arena is a rather complex and complicated one. Theocratic rule would never be popular in Egypt, whether of the Iranian style or any other version. A citizenry that has such respect for religious institutions unsurprisingly means that an advisory role for religious leaders (i.e. non-binding) would perhaps be acceptable to a majority, but there would still be significant resistance in that regard. The significance of religion in terms of Egyptian identity notwithstanding, most Egyptians are unfavorable toward parties based primarily on religious identity.

None of this ought to imply that Egyptians would back a legal ban on any particular political party due to their use of religion; citizens can think a particular thing is not a good idea without wanting a legal or constitutional stipulation reflecting their preferences. But it does suggest that

parties and politicians in Egypt, of any stripe or disposition, that seek to instrumentalize religion in any way might be well advised to think twice.

Unfortunately, political leaders sometimes do not seem to really learn the lessons of their predecessors. Since 2013, for example, religious leaders have clearly intervened in Egyptian politics as obviously and as blatantly as ever before—and from across the range of Egyptian society. Moreover, a very specific religious, political, anti-Islamist rhetoric has emerged from the new Egyptian presidency. It is different from the political Islamism of Morsi, and it does not contain the sectarianism that was associated with much religious discourse from the Islamist camp, but it still represents the instrumentalization of religion for political ends.

Eventually, though, such use of religion may catch up with these political leaders. The question is: regardless of whether they use—or do not use—religion for political gain, will they be successful in actually meeting the demands of their people in terms of political, economic, and social progress? In the end, the ability to deliver on expectations and ensure that the state fulfills its obligations to the citizenry is likely to make more difference in the enduring stability of these political systems in Arab countries and Muslim majority states than anything else.

Yet, religion and religious identity will continue to play very real and genuine roles in the lives of Arabs and Muslims—in the Arab region, but also further beyond. There have been many regrettable repercussions due to the engagement of religious identity in broader political disputes in the region—evident from fairly early on in the Syrian revolutionary uprising. While it did not arise as a sectarian revolt against a ruling Alawite elite, calls for unity against tyranny eventually became more and more drowned out by sectarianism. Elsewhere in the region as well, the temptation to fall into narrow and parochial identities unfortunately proved strong—paving the way for recruitment into Dai'sh and other similar elements.

This is not to say that the revolutionary uprisings were destined to be this way—or that, indeed, they have all turned out this way. It is still too early to delineate the final historical judgment on these uprisings—and how they might turn out. Even within Syria, a genuine revolutionary impulse toward unity and prosperity of all communities still remains. What is clear, though, is that in the past 5 years, religion has far too often been cited as an inspiration for less than progressive ends. Whether in the service of autocratic systems and states, religiously inspired extremism, or other types of radicalism, religion has certainly not been noted as a deeply positive force.

Was this inevitable? Some might argue as such, noting how often religion has been used and abused for political partisan ends. Yet, historians, analysts, and journalists often focus on negative instances—such is the nature of media and academia and the temptation to look at the negative rather than the positive. Will there be a role for a positive, progressive religious expression that can genuinely support comprehensive development of individuals and societies in these regions? Perhaps there may be. Given that religion is indeed likely to remain as a significant force in the region, one hopes that sooner, rather than later, this positive role will find a sure footing.

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The Saudi *‘ulama* and the Syrian Civil War

Raihan Ismail

The Sunni *‘ulama* (clerics) of Saudi Arabia are some of the most influential voices in the Muslim world. They are also some of the most controversial. One consistent area of controversy is sectarianism: the *‘ulama* have for many years, and to varying degrees, spoken out against Shi’ism, its sects, and its adherents. The Syrian uprising and subsequent civil war have given rise to a new flashpoint for sectarianism within the Muslim world, given the fundamentally sectarian direction that the conflict has taken. Syria, long led by the Assad family from the country’s minority Alawite Shi’a sect, has come into the focus of the Saudi clerics in a way that it had not before. Given the influential position of the Saudi clerics within the Muslim world, especially as a conservative and potentially countervailing force against a new wave of Islamist radicalism, it is important to understand how they have responded to the events in Syria.

This chapter examines the rhetoric of the Saudi *‘ulama* in relation to the Syrian uprising and civil war, and their responses to the involvement of jihadi groups in the country. The chapter finds that the changing nature of the conflict has created a range of challenges for Saudi *‘ulama* of different persuasions (establishment and non-establishment, traditionalist, and progressive). The *‘ulama* have generally found themselves wedged between two competing forces. The first is their natural opposition—in which they are joined by the Saudi government—to the manner in which an Alawite-led regime has oppressed Syria’s Sunni population. The second is their desire, emanating from a range of largely political factors, not to

support—or be seen to be supporting—the increasingly radical and brutal elements of the anti-regime forces such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, who now identify themselves as Islamic State (IS).

These competing interests have given rise to difficult questions for the Saudi *‘ulama*. To what extent, for example, should they consider it permissible for non-Syrian Sunnis to travel to Syria and fight for opposition forces, especially in light of the dark history of Saudis travelling to fight in what they see as holy wars abroad? Before examining how the Saudi *‘ulama* have approached the Syrian conflict, it is first important to understand who the Saudi *‘ulama* are, and the ways in which individual clerics are classified for the purposes of that examination.

CLASSIFYING THE SAUDI CLERICS

The Saudi *‘ulama* are well known for their anti-Shi’a rhetoric. Theologically, the Saudi *‘ulama* find many Shi’a practices unacceptable and amounting to infidelity. They have criticized Shi’ism since the establishment of the first Saudi state in 1744 under the religious patronage of Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. The anti-Shi’a fervor intensified after the Iranian revolution, when the Saudi religious establishment published and re-published anti-Shi’a tracts, largely targeting Twelver Shi’ism, which is the dominant sect in Iran.¹

The Saudi *‘ulama* within the country’s religious establishment are known as government clerics or establishment clerics (*hizb al-wulat*). They are obedient to, and refrain from criticizing, the Saudi ruling family.² Another loosely defined set of clerics operates outside the religious establishment. These *‘ulama* emerged following the first Gulf War and questioned the Saudi government’s decision to allow US troops to be based on Saudi soil. Many, even after imprisonment, were co-opted by the government in the late 1990s and have since demonstrated support for the ruling family and refrained from overtly questioning the government. These *‘ulama* are also known as Sahwa *‘ulama*.³

Another set of clerics is the jihadi clerics, who are mostly in prison. They provide the theological legitimacy for jihadi operations. Some of them, including Shaykh Nasir al-Fahd and ‘Ali al-Khudayri, have retracted their positions although they remain in prison.⁴ Their jihadi tracts, however, are still used by jihadi groups, including IS, to justify their operations.⁵ The classification of clerics as establishment, non-establishment, or jihadi is relevant for many purposes. But, when it comes to clerical attitudes toward the Shi’a, there are far more similarities than differences.

Another categorization, which may be better suited to sectarian purposes, is one that identifies traditionalist *'ulama* and progressive *'ulama*. The traditionalists espouse the Salafi criticism against Shi'ism. There are "aggressive traditionalists," who are intense in their rhetoric and dedicate a substantial number of sermons, lectures, and publications to discussing the Shi'a. One prominent such *'alim* (religious scholar) is Shaykh Nasir al-'Umar, a Sahwa-affiliated *'alim* known for his fiery works against the Shi'a. Another is Rabi' al-Madkhali, an avid government loyalist, who has strongly criticized Shi'a theology. The fact that al-'Umar, a non-establishment cleric, and al-Madkhali, an establishment cleric, are in lockstep when it comes to the Shi'a demonstrates the limited utility of the establishment versus non-establishment categorization in sectarian matters.

A further category contains "mild traditionalists" who are not frequent polemicists, but who hold essentially the same views as the aggressive traditionalists. Shaykh 'Abdel 'Aziz Ibn Baz is one cleric who takes a similar theological position to that of Shaykh Nasir al-'Umar, albeit not with the same fervor. Although he is less active in denouncing the Shi'a sect, the Shaykh has endorsed the works of aggressive traditionalists.

Progressive clerics, on the other hand, promote national reconciliation with the Saudi Shi'a population (and, to some extent, the Bahraini Shi'a). But more importantly, they refrain from making statements that are inflammatory and sectarian-oriented. This does not mean that these clerics theologically accept the Shi'a faith, far from it. When confronted by questions regarding Shi'ism and forced to answer, they take similar positions to those of the traditionalist *'ulama*. Shaykh Salman al-'Awdah is a prominent Sahwa cleric known for his participation in the National Dialogue in 2003, initiated by King Abdullah while he was the Crown Prince. The Shaykh wrote an article in which he articulated the diversity within the Shi'a sect and forbade Muslims from passing general judgment against all Shi'a. However, like other traditionalist *'ulama*, he argues that unrepentantly deviant Shi'a should be alienated and barred from positions of power.⁶ Nonetheless, these clerics are significantly more cautious than the traditionalists and generally avoid sectarian rhetoric, especially, concerning Saudi and Bahraini Shi'a.

BEFORE THE SYRIAN UPRISING

Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, anti-Shi'a polemics have been almost entirely focused on Shi'a Twelvers, and it is not difficult to understand why. Saudi Arabia contains a restive Twelver Shi'a population, which was

inspired by the Iranian revolution and which revolted against the ruling family in 1979. More importantly, Iran and Hezbollah are dominated by Twelvers and have been described as politically treacherous by the Saudi ruling family, traditionalist clerics and, to a large extent, progressive clerics as well. Rhetoric against the Alawites, also known as the Nusayriyyah, did not feature prominently before the Syrian uprising. This does not mean that the Saudi *‘ulama* have been silent regarding the Alawites. Following the Hama massacre in 1982, Shaykh ‘Abdel ‘Aziz Ibn Baz (Saudi Arabia’s Grand Mufti until 1993) declared Hafez al-Assad an infidel and specifically identified him as a member of the Alawite sect.⁷ Ibn Baz’s motivation to attack al-Assad, however, was arguably not sectarian, but stemmed from his opposition to Ba’athist ideals. Ibn Baz made similar declarations in relation to Gamal Abdel Nasser and Saddam Hussein.⁸ The Alawites, a small sect of little political significance to Saudi Arabia, remained marginal in the sectarian rhetoric of the Saudi *‘ulama*. The focus on the Alawite sect was only pursued by traditionalist clerics who specialized in the studies of “deviant sects,” including Shaykh Mamduh al-Harbi and ‘Abdullah al-Salafi.

Several explanations account for the *‘ulama*’s lack of interest in the Alawites. Although the Assad regime is known for its brutality and is generally considered to be a minority sect ruling a Sunni majority, the regime has never substantially employed Alawite religious symbolism and has tolerated Sunni Islam. The Syrian Sunni religious establishment of Sufi orientation was the dominant religious voice in Syria before the uprising began. Shaykh Ramadan Buti, the Imam of the Umayyad mosque, was said to have had excellent relations with Hafez al-Assad and a strong presence in the Syrian media.⁹ Despite the fact that the Alawite sect does not stipulate the need to undertake the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), Hafez al-Assad performed it in 1977. The act was highly publicized in the Arab world. Similarly, although the Alawites pray very differently from Sunnis, both Bashar and his father would publicly pray behind leading Sunni Sufi *‘ulama*.

The Assad regime also maintained the heritage of the Umayyad Caliphate in Syria even though Shi’a believers, including Alawites, view the Umayyads unfavorably. Similarly, although the Alawite sect preaches endogamy,¹⁰ Bashar al-Assad’s wife, Asma, is of Sunni background. Accordingly, prior to the Syrian uprising, the Assad regime was not overtly sectarian, but a secular and oppressive Ba’athist administration. As stated by Shaykh Uthman al-Faris (a pro-government and a traditionalist cleric) in 2007, “although other Shi’a sects are more deviant [mentioning the

Ismaili and the Alawite sects], the Twelver sect is dangerous, politically treacherous and therefore more focus should be directed at this sect.”¹¹ Al-Faris’s statement confirms that for the Saudi clerics, it is not only about theology; their focus on sectarian matters is very much influenced by the politics of the day.

The fall of the Sunni-dominated regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the subsequent rise of Shi’a rule in Iraq galvanized the anti-Shi’a rhetoric among Salafis, not just in Saudi Arabia but also in Kuwait and Egypt. Yet, although the feared “Shi’a crescent” (a term coined by King Abdullah of Jordan, describing the cooperation between Iran, Hezbollah, and the Assad regime) involved Syria as well, the anti-Alawite rhetoric remained limited, signifying no change to the Saudi clerics’ earlier indifference to the Assad regime. The main focus remained on the Shi’a Twelvers who, for many Saudi clerics, posed the principal external (through Iran) and internal (through the domestic Shi’a population) threats. It was not until the Syrian uprisings in 2011 and the subsequent civil war that Saudi *‘ulama* began to shift their attention to Syria. This attention meant a focus on the Alawite sect.

THE SAUDI CLERICS AND THE ALAWITE SECT

Some Saudi clerics are careful to qualify the way in which they talk about the Shi’a. For example, while many clerics attack all Twelvers as infidels, others label them as “deviant”—a lesser charge—and concede that not all are removed from Islam.

These qualifications, however, do not apply to the way in which the Saudi clerics talk about the Alawite theology. Saudi clerics totally reject the legitimacy of the Alawite religious traditions, as Alawite theology is significantly different from that of Sunni Islam. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an in-depth explanation of the differences, a few examples may suffice. The most fundamental difference lies in the Alawites’ reverence for, and worship of, ‘Ali Ibn Talib, whom Sunnis consider an esteemed caliph but of no divine status. The Alawites do not fast during the month of Ramadan, but offer a prayer in which ‘Ali is invoked to direct, assist, and guard the believers of the sect. The Alawites celebrate Persian and Christian festivals, which again distinguishes them from Twelvers and Sunnis.¹²

These differences are highlighted by the traditionalist Saudi *‘ulama*. Establishment clerics such as Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al al-Shaykh, a prominent

member of the Board of Senior ‘Ulama, declare the infidelity of the sect due to their worship of ‘Ali and not Allah. The traditionalist *‘ulama* emphasize practices that they see as marking the sect as removed from Islam, such as the non-obligatory nature of prayers, fasting during Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the permission of alcohol consumption. These criticisms are often explored and developed by the *‘ulama* within a framework of “us and them.”

Shaykh ‘Umar al-Zayd is a popular traditionalist cleric who is often invited to speak on Salafi satellite channels. In an online lecture, he has argued that the Alawites believe that ‘Ali is still alive and resides in the clouds, with some even believing that he occupies the moon. The Alawites, according to the Shaykh, interpret Islam within the framework of a deviant understanding of Islam. Al-Zayd claims that the Alawites permit fornication and encourage the consumption of alcohol. Moreover, he claims that they do not perform prayers and operate in secrecy. Without reservation, the Shaykh declares the sect to be removed from Islam, but sympathizes with the “ignorant” members of the sect such as Bedouins.¹³ He also draws from the works of the influential thirteenth-century scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, who not only declared the exclusion of the sect from Islam, but permitted their killing, arguing that members of the sect would not hesitate to betray Muslims if given the opportunity. Ibn Taymiyyah openly declared the infidelity of the Alawites and legitimized *jihad* against them. According to him, the Alawites were worse than the Jews and Christians. Ibn Taymiyyah’s works are widely used when discussing Shi’a infidelity, especially among traditionalist clerics within Saudi religious circles.¹⁴

Although progressive *‘ulama* including Shaykh ‘Awadh al-Qarni and Salman al-‘Awdah do not go into great detail when discussing Alawite theology, they tend to subscribe to their colleagues’ views that the sect is removed from Islam. The difference between the traditionalists and the progressives emerges when discussing the Syrian uprisings and civil war: progressive *‘ulama* refrain from employing sectarian tones and often speak about the situation in strategic terms. Sectarian discussion is limited to theological, not political, matters. Shaykh ‘Awadh al-Qarni, for instance, refers in passing to the Alawite sect and characterizes it as “deviant” and theologically corrupt, but does not make sectarian rhetoric the feature of his lecture.¹⁵ Shaykh Salman al-‘Awdah takes a similar approach.

THE SYRIAN UPRISING AND THE SAUDI 'ULAMA

As the Arab Spring uprising swept the region in 2011, a nervous Saudi government, endorsed by the establishment clerics, launched a crackdown on domestic dissent. The country's Grand Mufti, the traditionalist Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz Al al-Shaykh, declared the protests to be un-Islamic¹⁶ and did not criticize the government's decision to intervene in support of the Sunni regime in neighboring Bahrain. The government's military intervention in Bahrain was also positively viewed by Shaykh Rabi' al-Madkhali, a traditionalist *'alim* loyal to the state.

Other traditionalist *'ulama*, including some non-establishment clerics such as Nasir al-'Umar, similarly supported the Bahraini intervention, characterizing the protests in Bahrain as sectarian (i.e., instigated by the Shi'a population) and lacking in legitimacy. Traditionalist *'ulama* highlighted the infidelity of the Shi'a protesters in Bahrain who, according to them, were Iranian agents. Saudi policymakers echoed this sentiment.¹⁷ The traditionalist clerics went to great lengths to distinguish the Bahraini protesters from the instigators of the Egyptian, Libyan, and Tunisian revolutions. They characterized these latter cases (correctly) as popular movements, but discussed the Bahraini demonstrations by pointing to Shi'a "treachery."¹⁸

Progressive *'ulama* were more cautious. Shaykh 'Awadh al-Qarni, without legitimizing the Bahraini uprising, warned of the importance of dealing with the Bahraini Shi'a constructively, as dismissing their concerns would only make them move closer to Iran. He also refrained from employing the sectarian polemics propagated by his traditionalist colleagues.¹⁹ It must be noted, however, that although progressive *'ulama* use different language, they do not oppose their colleagues when discussing sectarian concerns. They are generally able to frame their more moderate arguments without overtly criticizing traditionalist *'ulama*.

In the context of the initial uprising in Syria, there is no doubt that the Saudi Sunni *'ulama* of all persuasions supported the anti-government protesters. The traditionalist *'ulama*, especially the aggressive traditionalists, quickly came out to characterize the uprising as a Sunni versus Shi'a struggle. Shaykh Muhammad al-'Arifi is a prominent cleric who is known for his often inflammatory attacks against the Shi'a. The Shaykh can be described as a celebrity cleric and is loosely affiliated with the Sahwa. He has a significant Twitter following and is commonly known as the "Brad

Pitt of Sheikhdом.”²⁰ In early 2011, the Shaykh strongly condemned the “Nusayri” regime as backed by Iran. The Shaykh informed his audience on a satellite channel (Wisal) that a Syrian from Daraa had informed him that Iranian fighters were shooting at protesters. The Shaykh not only condemned the Alawite sect but also emphasized the Shi’a connections between the Assad regime and Iran.²¹ Similarly, in March 2011, Shaykh ‘Umar al-Zayd, an aggressive traditionalist *‘alim*, appeared on the Salafi satellite channel Al-Safa to analyze the situation in Syria. The Shaykh argued that the Assad regime was operating to promote its sectarian ascendancy with the help of the “Safavids” (a common term used by traditionalist *‘ulama* when referring to Iran). The Shaykh contended that the regime and its Iranian allies were trying to expand Shi’a territories at the expense of Sunnis.²²

When the Assad government retaliated brutally against the protesters, both traditionalist and progressive Saudi *‘ulama* opened rhetorical fire on the Syrian regime. The traditionalist *‘ulama* described the regime as motivated by sectarianism, and sermons, lectures, and *fatwas* were dedicated to the plight of Sunni Syrians. In a televised Friday sermon attended by thousands, Shaykh al-‘Arifi spoke about the cold-blooded murder, rape, and torture of Syrian Sunnis.²³ The Grand Mufti also discussed the plight of Syrians, described some of the atrocities committed against them, and prayed to God for their victory.²⁴

As the conflict became more brutal and the Saudi government pledged its support for the Free Syrian Army (FSA), more and more clerics, both traditionalist and progressive, expressed their views. Shaykh ‘Awadh al-Qarni is a Sahwa *‘alim* who can be categorized as a traditionalist. In a well-attended lecture in the presence of members of the ruling family, he prayed for Bashar al-Assad to meet an end similar to that of Muammar Qaddafi for all the atrocities committed against Sunnis in Syria. He further claimed that Bashar was the enemy of Islam, humanity, freedom, and the Muslim community.²⁵ In a separate television interview, when al-Qarni was insulted by a Shi’a viewer who called into the program, he responded by arguing that the Alawite regime was freely killing Muslims in Syria but did not dare attack Israel.²⁶

Many traditionalist *‘ulama* not only attack the beliefs and practices of the Alawites but also claim that the sect is treacherous. A common argument, used originally by Ibn Taymiyyah and invoked by a number of present-day clerics, is that during the Crusades, the Alawites sided with the Crusaders. Historically, the Alawites have always perceived Sunnis

as “their worst oppressors,” and in the words of Matti Moosa, “they [Nusayris] state that they transmit from generation to generation the stories of Sunnites’ persecution of their people.” Moosa also adds, “when the Crusaders learned that the Nusayris were not truly a Muslim sect, they became tolerant toward them.”²⁷

Shaykh ‘Umar al-Zayd claims not to have anything against the Alawite sect per se and points to the sect’s “treachery” as the reason for denouncing it. The Shaykh also repeats claims of Alawite manipulation during the Crusades.²⁸ Progressive *‘ulama* have also been passionate in their criticism of the Syrian regime and have pledged solidarity with the Syrians, praying for their victory. But unlike traditionalist *‘ulama*, these clerics have tended to refrain from using overtly sectarian rhetoric.

Shaykh Salih al-Fawzan, one of the prominent members of the Board of Senior ‘Ulama, can arguably be categorized as a progressive *‘alim*. He demonstrated support for the early protest movement in the Syrian uprising. In a television interview, the Shaykh was asked by a viewer to discuss Bashar al-Assad’s “infidelity.” The Shaykh quickly reproached the caller, asking him to leave the issue of *takfir* (declaring the infidelity of another) to the *‘ulama* and not engage in the practice, as it is a matter that should not be taken lightly. One suspects that traditionalist clerics would have been considerably more obliging in response to the question.²⁹

Shaykh ‘Awadh al-Qarni has also attempted to examine the nature of the conflict while avoiding sectarian language. He has declared the Assad regime to be a secular regime that has hijacked both the Ba’ath party and the Alawite sect, noting that the Assads are only one tribe within the sect.³⁰ This demonstrates the Shaykh’s unwillingness to vilify the sect in general, but he also notably stops short of explicitly accepting the sect’s legitimacy. This echoes al-Fawzan’s response to his questioner: while al-Fawzan did not take the bait and attack the Alawites, he did not take the opportunity to defend them, either.

The involvement of Hezbollah and Iran in the Syrian conflict caused some progressive *‘ulama*, especially the Sahwa-affiliated Salman al-‘Awdah and ‘Awadh al-Qarni, to express frustration. Most progressive *‘ulama* supported Hezbollah in the 2006 war against Israel; for them, Israel was of more concern than Shi’a transnational influence. During the 2006 war, Shaykh Abdullah Ibn Jibrin, a prominent and now deceased traditionalist cleric who was known for his fiery sermons targeting the Shi’a, issued a fatwa declaring it impermissible to pray for Hezbollah’s victory.³¹ He was criticized by Islamists and *‘ulama* outside the Kingdom, but was supported

by most Saudi traditionalists. Al-Awdah broke ranks and announced that although Hezbollah is undeniably deviant, Sunnis should temporarily set aside sectarian disagreements, as Israel was the greater enemy.³² He found very limited support in the likes of progressive clerics such as Shaykh ‘Awadh al-Qarni. Both clerics have since expressed regret about their 2006 statements, saying that they have been proven wrong in light of Hezbollah’s subsequent and firm support for the Assad regime.³³

Traditionalist clerics, on the other hand, have boasted of being right all along. In mid-2013, Shaykh Nasir al-‘Umar recounted an incident in which a pupil attending his lecture profusely apologized to him. The Shaykh asked the pupil why he was apologizing. According to al-‘Umar, the pupil then stated that his own father used to curse the Shaykh for his harsh criticism of Hezbollah in 2006 and his refusal to demonstrate support for the organization in its war against Israel. The Shaykh informed the pupil that he should not be too critical of his father as many Muslims were manipulated into believing Hezbollah’s sincerity.³⁴

THE CALL TO JIHAD AND THE MORAL DILEMMA

The greatest dilemma for the Saudi clerics has been the extent of their support for the various groups fighting against the Syrian regime. With many Saudis feeling strongly about the plight of their fellow Sunnis in Syria, the issue of jihad, and Saudis fighting in Syria, dominated Saudi Arabia’s political discussions. The Saudi government responded strongly to the prospect of Saudi men travelling to Syria to fight alongside the opposition forces, declaring the act a criminal offense. This reaction was not surprising. The Saudi government fears the radicalization of Saudi men in Syria, following its experience with the domestic terrorist attacks from 2003 to 2006 launched by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The instigators of the attacks were mainly Saudis who fought in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya. The September 11, 2001, attacks also tainted the reputation of the Saudi state, as 15 out of 19 hijackers were Saudis. Prominent Sahwa clerics mostly came out in support of the government’s stance on Saudis joining the Syrian struggle. It must be noted, however, that the *‘ulama* endorse jihad fought by Syrians themselves against the Syrian regime, considering this to be a proper defensive jihad on the basis that the Syrian Sunnis are being threatened and oppressed. The traditionalist Shaykh Muhammad al-‘Arifi, in a sermon given in mid-2012, urged all Sunni Syrians to take up arms and fight against the Assad regime.³⁵

Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz Al al-Shaykh has warned against jihad in Syria, arguing that it is better to assist the Syrian Sunnis financially.³⁶ Since late 2012, Shaykh Salman al-'Awdah has strongly emphasized that non-Syrians must refrain from entering the conflict and has preached against travelling to Syria in the name of jihad. In an October 2012 lecture, made available online, he argued that Syria should be no different from Afghanistan and Iraq, in that, outsiders should not travel there to take up arms. According to him, there are a few reasons for this position. First, he argues that Bashar al-Assad is using foreign jihadis to delegitimize the revolution, stating that his government is fighting *takfiris* from abroad who are not Syrians. Al-'Awdah contends that if Bashar captures a group of foreign jihadis and presents them as evidence to support his claim, "we have given this regime ammunition." Second, he points out that Syria has been abandoned by the USA and the broader international community, while some regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey have pledged support for the Syrian opposition by sending weapons and arming the opposition fighters. He suggests that if these countries realize that their own citizens have joined forces and travelled to Syria, they will be reluctant to continue to assist the Syrians who are dependent on the limited support they receive. Third, he argues that the Syrians are not in need of more fighters but require weapons, especially anti-missile machinery, to resist regime airstrikes. Foreign fighters would, according to al-'Awdah, unnecessarily place themselves in harm's way. In his lecture, he acknowledges the frustration felt by most Saudis in being unable to provide greater assistance to their Syrian brethren. But he stresses that there are other avenues to contribute, including by providing financial support and by not forgetting their suffering. He also notes that he had heard the Free Syrian Army itself declared a rejection of foreign fighters (although he acknowledges to have not been able to verify the report).³⁷

The issue of jihad became more fervently contested when the direct involvement of Hezbollah and the Iranian Quds force in Syria became highly publicized. In June 2013, the World 'Ulama Council gathered in Cairo, attended by Sunni *'ulama* from Kuwait, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia (including the Grand Mufti), Palestine, Libya, Jordan, and Sudan. These *'ulama* declared the need for jihad against the Syrian regime and its allies. Jihad was urged in the context of "Jihad bil-nafs" (with soul), "Jihad bil-mal" (with wealth), and "Jihad bil-Silah" (with weapons). In a report published by *Al-Jazeera* outlining the details of the Cairo meeting, the

‘ulama reached a consensus that Hezbollah and Iran’s direct involvement in the Syrian conflict constituted their declaration of war against Muslims and Islam. They also called for boycotts of Iranian products.³⁸

This decision was followed up by a Friday sermon given by Shaykh Muhammad al-‘Arifi at ‘Umar Ibn al-‘Aas mosque in Cairo, in which he declared jihad against the Alawites, Hezbollah, and Iran, and passionately highlighted the plight of Syrian Sunnis. The Shaykh urged Muslims (appealing specifically to the “honorable and brave” Egyptians) to help Syrians and warned that if the Safavids (Iranians) and *Hizb Al-Lat* (the party of the idol Lat) were not contained in Syria, they would advance to other Arab countries. The Shaykh, however, did not specify the nature of the jihad he was endorsing. He actively promoted his sermon back in Saudi Arabia and abroad, tweeting a link to it and re-tweeting praises and mentions of it.

The progressive ‘Awadh al-Qarni and the traditionalist Sa’d al-Burayk both appeared in a television interview and praised the Cairo gathering, arguing that it was long overdue and that the *‘ulama* needed to take a stand on the matter. Al-Qarni thanked the *‘ulama* who congregated in Egypt and acknowledged their sincerity. The Shaykh emphasized his position that jihad waged by fighting in Syria should not be taken lightly, and spoke against it. He claimed to have been in contact with Syrian *‘ulama*, and fighters who informed him that they were not in need of foreign fighters except for those with certain military expertise. In fact, the Shaykh argued that ordinary unskilled fighters would be a burden to the Syrian opposition. He claimed that the clerics at the Cairo conference were referring only to jihad in the financial and material senses.³⁹

Shaykh Sa’d al-Burayk similarly praised the gathering in Cairo, regretting the fact that he could not attend it due to a prior engagement. He applauded the *‘ulama* but also suggested that their call to jihad was not a call for young men to fight in Syria but a more general call to provide assistance through other means not involving travel to Syria to fight. The Shaykh demanded that governments, including the Saudi government, assist the Syrians financially and help to arm the rebels.⁴⁰

It must be noted that the hardline cleric ‘Adnan al-‘Ar’our furiously criticized what he perceived as the inaction of Arab countries since Hezbollah’s recapture of Qusayr. In a television interview in May 2013, the Shaykh asked, “Why are you quiet? Oh Arab leaders! Why are you quiet with Hizb al-Shaytan’s involvement? If the situation persists, we

should declare *al-Nafir* [a general call to arms]. And we will curse every Muslim and Arab who refuses to take up arms to save Muslims in Syria and those who prevent them from fighting.”⁴¹

Yet, in another television interview in June 2013, the Shaykh changed course, arguing that Muslims should assist Syrians through other means and urging young non-Syrians not to travel to Syria and take up arms. There is unlikely to be an explanation for the contradiction other than that the Shaykh is known for his contradictory statements and erratic rhetoric.⁴²

Accordingly, the general position of the Saudi *'ulama* is to urge jihad in Syria, but only that which is limited to the religious obligation to arm the rebels and finance their struggle against the regime and its Iranian and Hezbollah allies. The fact that the rhetoric of some *'ulama* legitimizing jihad in Syria can be vague and contradictory has made them susceptible, as a group, to accusations that they have encouraged young men to travel to Syria.

WHOM DO THE CLERICS SUPPORT?

The Saudi government has openly declared its support for the Free Syrian Army. Since early 2012, there have been reports of Saudi money being channeled to pay FSA fighters and stock them with weapons.⁴³ Most Saudi *'ulama*, traditionalist and progressive, have spoken highly of the FSA since its formation. In March 2012, when the opposition forces had the upper hand in Syria, the traditionalist Shaykh Abd al-'Aziz Al al-Shaykh spoke positively about the FSA. He considered the financial assistance given to them as a form of jihad. He was especially pleased with the number of defections from government forces to the FSA and the increased participation of Syrians supporting the opposition movement. Although Jabhat al-Nusra, the Free Syrian Army's hardline Islamist rival, had already been established 2 months earlier in January 2012, the Shaykh did not mention the legitimacy of the group.⁴⁴ There is little doubt that the Saudi *'ulama* (traditionalist and progressive) support or at least tolerate the FSA.

Some *'ulama*, while not rejecting the FSA, criticize its secular nature. This position is articulated by Shaykh Muhammad al-Madkhali, a traditionalist cleric and avid government supporter. In a lecture given in November 2012, the Shaykh argued that the FSA does not promote Islam and does not fight in the name of implementing God's orders. He also noted that there are many various groups fighting under the banner of the FSA,

including secularists, nationalists, and even some Alawites. Again, despite his criticism, the Shaykh did not delegitimize the FSA. Interestingly, like many government clerics, the Shaykh went on to deplore Islamists generally (such as the Muslim Brotherhood) and in Syria.⁴⁵

The involvement of other groups in the Syrian conflict has caused more difficult divisions within Saudi religious circles. In late 2012, Shaykh Muhammad al-Madkhali was extremely critical of what he termed “al-Qaeda in Syria” (he did not mention Jabhat al-Nusra by name), claiming that they represent radical ideals.⁴⁶ In March 2013, Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Fawzan criticized Syrians and non-Syrians fighting for what he called “deviant” jihadi groups. The Shaykh warned them that if such fighters would like to help in Syria, they should take orders from the FSA. The Shaykh was criticized by Jabhat al-Nusra sympathizers for his stance.⁴⁷

On the other hand, in December 2012, the fervent sectarian Shaykh Nasir al-‘Umar responded to a question regarding the US declaration of Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist organization earlier in the month. The Shaykh argued that the USA was always quick to declare Muslims as terrorists, and demanded that others not immediately declare the illegitimacy of Jabhat al-Nusra, but properly investigate their convictions and actions. He noted that these *mujabideen* (his term) might have good qualities and some negative traits but should not be preemptorily dismissed as terrorists.⁴⁸

Shaykh ‘Umar al-Zayd went further and praised Jabhat al-Nusra as a legitimate jihadi organization. He argued that they do not violate Islamic teachings, treat Syrians with respect, are sincere to the Syrian cause, and fight alongside the FSA. Al-Zayd originally denied that Jabhat al-Nusra was an al-Qaeda affiliate, arguing that their fighters are honorable and dignified, unlike al-Qaeda’s militants.⁴⁹ However, when Jabhat al-Nusra explicitly pledged its allegiance to al-Qaeda in April 2013, the Shaykh adopted a more cautious tone. He announced that Jabhat al-Nusra was at that time fighting the regime’s forces and had not violated or opposed the Syrian cause. But if the regime were to fall and the group were to refuse to cooperate with Syrians and turn their struggle against them, the *‘ulama* would change their attitudes toward the group. The Shaykh was convinced that if Jabhat al-Nusra remained loyal to al-Qaeda they would be rejected by the Syrian people, giving the example of Iraq, where in Anbar and other Sunni areas the people rejected al-Qaeda, leading to the group’s failure there.⁵⁰ Obviously, the Shaykh was referring to the post-2005 “surge” in which Sunni tribal leaders and militias successfully cooperated with the American forces to defeat al-Qaeda.

Other traditionalist *'ulama* have remained quiet about Jabhat al-Nusra, perhaps fearing that expressing support for them could be construed as support for al-Qaeda. Since September 11, and the terror attacks that swept through Saudi Arabia from 2003 to 2006, Saudi clerics—regardless of their associations with the Saudi regime—have been noticeably careful to avoid suggestions that they support or are sympathetic to Islamic terrorism.

The rise of IS has altered the dynamics of the Syrian conflict and the response of the Saudi clerics. The group's subsequent altercation with Jabhat al-Nusra led to a deterioration in relations between al-Qaeda and IS, and in February 2014, the former renounced its association with the latter. Throughout 2014, the conflict between IS and other jihadi groups intensified and IS's brutality became more pronounced and internationally recognized.

Even before IS gained prominence in the Western media, especially after its capture of Mosul in June 2014, the Saudi *'ulama*, traditionalist and progressive alike, made concerted efforts to denounce the group. Unlike with Jabhat al-Nusra, the condemnation has been uniform. In July 2013, Shaykh 'Umar al-Zayd dedicated a lecture to discussing the crimes of Da'ish (the Arabic acronym for IS) and their place in Islam. According to the Shaykh, the group are *Khawarij*,⁵¹ a name which derives from the radical group of Muslims that assassinated 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin.

Al-Zayd noted that IS had declared many *'ulama* as being removed from Islam, including Shaykh Ibn Baz and Shaykh 'Uthaymeen (the latter was a prominent member of the Board of Senior 'Ulama). The Shaykh further claims that IS and al-Qaeda identify these *'ulama*, who are revered in Saudi circles, as the "Sultan's *'ulama*," a slight at their loyalty to the Saudi kingdom. According to the Shaykh, IS are *takfiris* (those who declare the infidelity of others) and *'ulama* who criticize them are improperly accused of being spies and infidels. The Shaykh went on to deplore Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for behaving as if they represent Islam, while having very limited support among Muslims. Al-Zayd then narrated the conflict between IS and Jabhat al-Nusra. He highlighted IS's attacks on the headquarters of other jihadi groups in Raqqa and Deir al-Zour, catching their rivals by surprise after pretending to seek reconciliation. He referred to social media evidence of these "treacherous" activities.⁵² In December 2013, the Shaykh appeared on the television channel al-Safa and claimed that IS had sent death threats to him through email, telephone, and social media, trying to intimidate him in every possible way. He argued that IS members were not jihadis but thugs and robbers.⁵³

Al-Zayd's July 2013 lecture was one of the earliest denouncements of IS by a Saudi cleric. By December 2013, more Saudi *'ulama* had come out against IS. In November 2013, the Saudi-based Syrian *'alim* Shaykh al-'Ar'our admitted to having tried to contact IS's leadership in an attempt to talk to them and understand their position. He stated that IS had rejected his offer, which he said was unsurprising due to their mysterious nature. The Shaykh then acknowledged that he had been able to speak to some members of IS and had asked them, "if you are an Islamic State, what is your position toward those who do not pledge *Bay'ah* [the swearing of allegiance which is required in Islam to legitimize the rule of the caliph]?" The Shaykh stated that his IS interlocutors were stunned by the question and did not have an answer. He further questioned the legitimacy of IS's leadership (and particularly al-Baghdadi) on the basis that a caliph cannot be mysterious and needs to enable Muslims to know what his convictions are and review his background. When asked by an interviewer on the television channel al-Risalah whether he supported Jabhat al-Nusra or IS, the Shaykh declared that although he did not support al-Nusra, they were different from IS, and had moderated their culture of declaring the infidelity of other Muslims.⁵⁴ In May 2014, IS threatened to assassinate al-'Arour.⁵⁵

The attitudes of the Saudi *'ulama* to IS in Syria cannot be examined in isolation from their attitudes to IS more generally, including the group's activities in Iraq. Saudi clerics supported the "Sunni Awakening" that originated in Fallujah and gradually spread throughout Iraq from late 2012. The traditionalist *'ulama* in particular dedicated sermons and lectures highlighting the legitimacy of the Sunni uprising in Iraq and criticizing Nouri al-Maliki's administration, characterizing it as motivated by sectarianism.

Traditionalist *'ulama* sought to downplay IS's role in the 2014 capture of Mosul by non-government groups. Shaykh al-Zayd pointed out other Sunni groups, including the Naqshbandiyya, former members of the Iraqi army, and marginalized Sunni communities, as behind the forces in Mosul. Although he admitted that IS exploited the situation, he argued that the planning, execution, and mobilization of the Mosul operation were not done by IS, and concluded that the capture of Mosul was a popular revolutionary movement instigated by Iraqi Sunnis.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the Saudi government has long criticized the al-Maliki government for its treatment of Iraqi Sunnis, blaming it for the fall of Mosul. The Iraqi government, on the other hand, has accused the Saudi regime of sponsoring IS financially and morally.

As the world watched in horror IS's brutal and rapid expansion through Iraq in 2014, the Saudi Sunni 'ulama of all persuasions declared their abhorrence of the group's brutality. In July 2014, Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Fawzan announced IS to be more dangerous than the Jews, the Christians, and the Rafidah, urging Muslim youth not to be deceived by the group.⁵⁷ Similarly, in August 2014, Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti, Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz Al al-Shaykh, declared IS to be the main enemy of Islam. According to the Shaykh, they had exploited the name of Islam and he urged young men not to view them positively, as they were determined to destroy Muslim countries.⁵⁸

It would not be surprising if some traditionalist 'ulama who are not affiliated with the government, such as Shaykh Adnan 'Arour and Shaykh 'Umar al-Zayd, have indirectly encouraged donations to Jabhat al-Nusra through their support for the group and denial of its al-Qaeda affiliations. Furthermore, with defections to IS by al-Nusra militants following IS's victories and its increasing momentum throughout 2014, Saudi money may conceivably have ended up with IS. But there is no evidence of Saudi clerical support for the group and such support would not be in the clerics' interests.

NOTES

1. Guido Steinberg, *Jihadi-Salafism and the Shi'is: Remarks about the Intellectual Roots of Anti-Shi'ism*. London: Hurst and Company, p. 116.
2. Madawi al-Rasheed identifies them as official Wahhabi 'ulama and opponents to these 'ulama have also described them as *hizb al-wulat* (loyalist). For more nuanced analysis, see Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 75.
3. For an excellent account on this movement, see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, trans. George Holoch. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
4. Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 147–55.
5. Harald Doornbos and Jenan Moussa, "Found: The Islamic State's terror laptop of doom." *Foreign Policy*, August 28, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/28/found-the-islamic-states-terror-laptop-of-doom/> (accessed July 8, 2015).
6. Shaykh Salman al-'Awdah, Salman al-'Awdah Yuhaddhir min al-Ikhtiraq al-Shi'i lil Wasat al-Sunni, www.yemeress.com/akhbaralyom/20650 (accessed September 1, 2014); Shaykh Salman al-'Awdah, Mawqif min al-Shi'a: Salman

- al-‘Awdah, <http://majles.alukah.net/showthread.php?t=7613> (accessed September 1, 2014).
7. Shaykh Ibn Baz, Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn Baz yuhadhir min al-Nusayri al-Ba’thi Hafez al-Assad, www.ansaaar.com/showthread.php?t=7559 (accessed September 1, 2014).
 8. al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, p. 41.
 9. Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 81.
 10. Mordechai Nisan, *Minorities in the Middle East: A History of Struggle and Self-Expression*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1991, pp. 98–101.
 11. Shaykh ‘Uthman al-Faris, Al-Rafidah: ‘Aqidah wa Hadaf, 2014, <http://ar.islamway.net/collection/2708/> (accessed September 2, 2014). The Shaykh’s statement can be found in the first lecture.
 12. Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shi’as: The Ghulat Sects*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988, pp. 382–97.
 13. Shaykh ‘Umar al-Zayd, Nubdha ‘an al-Shi’a al-Nusayriyya (accessed September 1, 2014).
 14. Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah, Majmu‘ Fatawa Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah: Volume 8. Rabat: Maktabah al-Ma‘arif, p. 474.
 15. Shaykh ‘Awad al-Qarni, Al-Nusrah li Sha‘b Suriya (accessed September 1, 2014).
 16. “A fatwa from the Council of Senior Scholars in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia warning against mass demonstrations,” *Islamopedia*, <http://islamopediaonline.org/fatwa/fatwa-council-senior-scholars-kingdom-saudi-arabia-warning-against-mass-demonstrations> (accessed September 2, 2014).
 17. See, for example, Toby Matthiesen, “Saudi Arabia’s Shi’a problem.” *Foreign Policy*, March 7, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/03/07/saudi-arabias-shiite-problem/> (accessed July 8, 2015); David Roberts, “Blame Iran: A dangerous response to the Bahraini uprising.” *The Guardian*, August 20, 2011.
 18. Shaykh Muhammad al-‘Arifi, Al-Ahdath fi al-Bahrain bi ‘ayn Thaqibah. <http://islamstory.com/> (accessed September 2, 2014); Shaykh ‘Abdullah al-Salafi, Al-Shaykh al-Salafi fi Barnamij al-Bahrain fi Qulubina (accessed September 2, 2014).
 19. Shaykh ‘Awad al-Qarni, Mudakhalah al-Doctor Awad al-Qarni fi Ahdath al-Bahrain (accessed September 2, 2014).
 20. “Prominent Saudis: Sheikh Mohammed Al Arefe,” *Saudiwoman’s Weblog*, <http://saudiwoman.me/2008/09/13/prominent-saudis-sheikh-mohammed-al-arefe/> (accessed September 13, 2008).
 21. Shaykh Muḥammad al-‘Arifi, Al-Shaykh al-‘Arifi Yakshif Fadaiḥ Iran fi Syria (accessed December 10, 2011).

22. Shaykh 'Umar al-Zayd, Nubdha 'an al-Shi'a al-Nusayriyya.
23. Shaykh Muhammad al-Arifi, Ahdath Suriya, www.dailymotion.com/video/xixk81 (accessed September 2, 2014).
24. Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz Al al-Shaykh, Mufti al-Mamlakah al-Su'udiyah 'Abd al-'Aziz Al al-Shaykh yufti bi-wujub al-Jihad fi Suriya madiyyan wa ma'nawiyyan (accessed September 2, 2014).
25. Shaykh 'A'id al-Qarni, Allahumma Arina Bashar Mashnuqan, <http://sumiry.com/vb/showthread.php?p=70481> (accessed September 2, 2014).
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Sectarian and Ethnic Politics: The Syrian Conflict

Minerva Nasser-Eddine

Causative agents for the Syrian conflict (indeed, for the “Arab Spring” more broadly) can be categorized into three main groups: first, those who resisted the Bashar al-Assad regime for domestic political reasons; second, regional powers interested in retaining military and economic superiority over their neighbors; and finally, global powers whose interests arguably lie in extracting resources from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region efficiently and securely. The main focus of this chapter is to examine the strategies historically adopted by some of the more significant external actors. When their aspirations are understood, it is possible to forecast the consequences of recent upheavals more confidently.

The following passage was published in 1982 by Oded Yinon, a journalist and former official in the Foreign Ministry of Israel:

Lebanon’s total dissolution into five provinces serves as a precedent for the entire Arab world including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula and is already following that track. The dissolution of Syria and Iraq later on into ethnically or religiously unique areas such as in Lebanon, is Israel’s primary target on the Eastern front in the long run, while the dissolution of the military power of those states serves as the primary short term target. Syria will fall apart, in accordance with its ethnic and religious structure, into several states such as in present day Lebanon, so that there will be a Shi’ite Alawi state along its coast, a Sunni state in the Aleppo area, another Sunni state in Damascus hostile to its northern neighbor, and the Druzes who will set up a state, maybe even in our Golan, and certainly in the Hauran

and in northern Jordan. This state of affairs will be the guarantee for peace and security in the area in the long run, and that aim is already within our reach today.¹

Thirty years later, the fragmentation of the Levant into mini-states is currently under way. Few observers of Middle Eastern politics back in 1982 seriously contemplated this scenario becoming a reality, especially in relation to the stronger states of Iraq and Syria. Yet, since 2003, the “dissolution” of Iraq “into ethnically or religiously unique areas” has been witnessed. Whether the Sykes–Picot Agreement will become completely redundant, and whether an “Islamic State” will be recognized in accordance with the proclamation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or Islamic State (IS) in June 2014, are yet to be concluded. What is clear, however, is that we are witnessing, “the strongest challenge yet posed to the post-Ottoman order in the Levant.”²

YINON MARK II?

Despite the Israeli government’s surprisingly minimal public commentary during the ongoing Syrian war, it is of no coincidence that an oft-cited Zionist blueprint for the Middle East, albeit one published three decades ago, sets out in detail the geopolitical shifts being seen in the region. The objectives set out in the Yinon policy paper (notably the containment of Iran, weakening and fragmentation of Iraq and Syria, and shifting of the balance of power in favor of Israel) were also mirrored in a 1996 US neoconservative document to advise incoming Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a policy paper titled, “A clean break: A new strategy for securing the realm.”³

Consistent with this strategic outlook is the policy of “constructive instability” in the Middle East applied by President George W. Bush’s administration. Robert Satloff, the executive director of the Washington Institute, finds that Bush “was the first president to argue that stability was itself an obstacle to the advancement of US interests in the Middle East,” and that, “the protection of US citizens and the security of US interests are best served by fundamental change in Middle East regimes toward welcoming—rather than stifling—the full participation of their citizenry in political and economic life.”⁴ The objective was to reshape the MENA region with either compliant or at least manageable regimes.

These approaches signify a new form of imperial foreign intervention, which Gilles Dorronsoro calls “a strategy of democratic destabilization.”⁵ He specifically describes the method of operation as “exploiting elements within society that are calling for change; supporting their actions by mobilizing local and international media in their favor; inventing a figurehead behind whom they can unite; and increasing international pressure on the powers to whom they are opposed.”⁶ These tactics became evident during the Arab Spring protests of 2010–2011. By then, fear of “Islamic” terrorism and “jihadi Islam” had grown due to their perceived threat to ethnic and religious minorities in the region. The atrocities and threats of a small number of individuals caused widespread concern. This prompted some leading policymakers and commentators to conclude that the “break-up” of troublesome countries in the Levant is “the only solution” to resolve these “humanitarian” problems.⁷ In parallel to these developments, relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia are currently warming, primarily to counter the regional domination of Iran, which ultimately seems to be the bane of the Israeli, Saudi, Turkish, and American geopolitical interests.

“A clean break” clearly predicts the chaos of post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. The conclusion is that Iraq “would be ripped apart by the politics of warlords, thieves, clans, sects, and key families.”⁸ This in turn suggests that the turmoil that “enveloped the country since 2003 has not been an unintended consequence, but rather the one which was predicted years earlier by the war’s architects and then perfectly executed.”⁹ Targeting Iraq’s economy was the key to its demise. The 8-year war between Iraq and Iran certainly had a devastatingly high human, economic, and political toll on both countries. Economically, Iraq was burdened with high war debts (estimates of US \$130 billion) through providing services to returning soldiers and rebuilding the country. Iraq’s grievance toward Kuwait for side drilling and exceeding its oil supply quota, and thus keeping Iraq’s economy down, were some of the reasons provided by the regime in its justification for invading Kuwait in August 1990. Regional powers believed Saddam Hussein needed to be contained and Iraq needed to remain weak. Fourteen years earlier, Yinon detailed it in the following manner:

Iraq, rich in oil on the one hand and internally torn on the other, is guaranteed as a candidate for Israel’s targets. Its dissolution is even more important for us than that of Syria. Iraq is stronger than Syria. In the short run, it is Iraqi power, which constitutes the greatest threat to Israel. An Iraqi-Iranian

war will tear Iraq apart and cause its downfall at home even before it is able to organize a struggle on a wide front against us. Every kind of inter-Arab confrontation will assist us in the short run and will shorten the way to the more important aim of breaking up Iraq into denominations as in Syria and in Lebanon. In Iraq, a division into provinces along ethnic/religious lines as in Syria during Ottoman times is possible. So, three (or more) states will exist around the three major cities: Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, and Shi'ite areas in the south will separate from the Sunni and Kurdish north. It is possible that the present Iranian-Iraqi confrontation will deepen this polarization.¹⁰

Indeed it did. The Iran–Iraq conflict planted the sectarian seed and highlighted the ambitions of these two regional powers. This worried other regional actors such as Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Iran and Iraq were seen as threats by these neighboring countries and, because of their anti-US sentiment, by the USA as well. The Americans adopted the policy of “dual containment,” intentionally keeping both states weak and allowing neither to emerge from the war as a victor. This combined inter-Arab, inter-regional, and international geopolitical rivalry assisted in weakening these two countries and allowing Iraq’s demise to take place. What followed were the crippling United Nations-endorsed sanctions on Iraq, pressure to conform to weapons of mass destruction searches, the oil for food program, accumulation of international debt and liabilities (US \$500 billion by the end of Saddam Hussein’s rule), and Kuwaiti reparations (US \$200 billion), all combined with negative economic growth, which produced a debt-to-gross domestic product ratio of more than 1000%, making it the most indebted country in the world.¹¹ This was in addition to persistent foreign-backed covert operations targeting internal dissent in Iraq. Finally, the 2003 US-led invasion particularly sealed Iraq’s fate by dissolving the army, the de-Ba’athification of all levels of society, and patronizing sectarian militias.

In today’s post-Nouri al-Maliki era, Iraqi postwar reconstruction is rendered more difficult and complicated due to outside interference, minimal reconciliation between sects, and the rise of IS. The civil war that particularly gripped the nation during the Maliki premiership caused Iraqis to be embattled along ethnic and sectarian fault lines. The groups disenfranchised under the Saddam Hussein regime—the Shi’as and the Kurds—turned to seek revenge on the former rulers and the weak (the Sunnis and the Christians). Acts of revenge against the Sunnis resulted in the rise of

militant Sunni Muslims, one arm represented by the violent and successful IS. Kurds strove to gain and retain control of the oil-rich regions of northern Iraq, including Kirkuk. The scramble for territory and power remains unresolved.

If formal partition of Iraq into three parts eventually occurs, then significant population transfers and further violent acts of ethnic cleansing will transpire. The resulting tensions could well promote civil strife within the new borders, even within ethnic and sectarian factions. The inhabitants of Iraq will thus suffer from widespread conflict for some time to come.

WITHER SYRIA?

Another area of interest to both Israel and the USA is that of Syria and Lebanon. These two historically linked neighbors are among the most ethnically and religiously diverse societies in the Levant. The Syrian conflict did not commence as a sectarian conflict; it represented a reaction to decades of serious economic inequalities and the lack of political liberalism and accountability. Yet, as the conflict enters its fifth year, these grievances have become secondary and many minority groups, which initially took a neutral stand, are now being forced to take sides. We are witnessing, therefore, not only the shift toward a sectarian and ethnic-based conflict, but also the cordoning off of geographic areas within Syria along ethnic lines. Whether or not these minority groups in Syria succeed in their quest for survival, and even autonomy, is a significant factor in the reshaping of the MENA region.

Yinon's vision for Syria is well on the way to being realized—an Alawite heartland on the mountainous west coast of Syria, with the strategic ports of Lattakia and Tartus, and moving inland toward the Orontes plain has been discussed as a feasible future enclave in a post-Assad Syria. The coastline is dominated by Alawites, Shi'as, and some Christian groups (also reflected in numerous neighborhoods in Damascus). Other parts of Damascus and all of Aleppo and Idlib provinces are Sunni-dominated. The Orontes plain acts as a buffer zone between the Alawites in the west and the two Sunni-dominant cities of Homs and Hama. Although the Syrian regime has denied any ethnic cleansing, its *shabiha*¹² forces have been active in making these areas more ethnically homogeneous. For instance, a July 2012 article contained the following interview offering an Alawite perspective:

“The massacres in the Sunni villages are to clean the west bank of the Orontes from Sunnis and the military operations in the area are to drive Sunnis eastward,” said Haider, a 30-year-old Alawite whose father is a senior security official based near Qerdaha, Assad’s home town. Haider said he had been present as his father discussed recently with officials in the security services the “creation of an Alawite state from Lattakia and Tartous to western Hama and Homs.”¹³

Meanwhile, the northwest of Syria is heavily Kurdish, and the southwest provinces of Sweida and Hauran are Druze-dominant. These territorial enclaves have partly emerged due to the historical demographic settlement of these groups, yet they have never been so homogeneous in their makeup.

Whatever happens to existing national borders, the creation of ethnic and religious enclaves will be more significant. The regional Kurdish population numbers approximately 25 million. They are currently found in Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey. The Shi’a Muslims are located in Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia, and parts of Yemen. The Alawites reside along the northern Lebanese, Syrian, and southwestern Turkish coastal borders. The Christians are scattered throughout Syria, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, and Lebanon. The Druze are distributed in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine. Sunni Muslims form the dominant population in the MENA region. If the breakup of both Iraq and Syria does take place, it is more than likely that most neighboring countries will be affected either directly (as Turkey faces challenges from its Kurdish and Alevi communities) or indirectly (transnational military collaboration emerging if co-religionists are perceived to be under threat).

In light of the long-established foreign policy objectives of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the USA the question arises as to the extent to which the current ethnic and sectarian conflicts result from local political and demographic factors versus the influence of more powerful external actors. In 2007, Seymour Hersh, a Pulitzer Prize winning American investigative journalist, reported on a new policy emerging from the White House called “The redirection.”¹⁴ Through this US policy initiative purportedly seeking “to reassert influence in the aftermath of the disastrous invasion of Iraq, the USA deliberately became party to the fomentation of sectarian conflict”¹⁵ throughout the MENA region. Hersh wrote, “[t]he USA has taken part in clandestine operations aimed at Iran and its ally Syria.

A by-product of these activities has been the bolstering of Sunni extremist groups that espouse a militant vision of Islam and are hostile to America and sympathetic to Al-Qaeda.”¹⁶ This claim is further substantiated by a 2006 US State Department cable released by WikiLeaks, which refers to tactics to counter al-Assad’s strengthened position in Syria:

PLAY ON SUNNI FEARS OF IRANIAN INFLUENCE: There are fears in Syria that the Iranians are active in both Shi’a proselytizing and conversion of, mostly poor, Sunnis. Though often exaggerated, such fears reflect an element of the Sunni community in Syria that is increasingly upset by and focused on the spread of Iranian influence in their country through activities ranging from mosque construction to business. Both the local Egyptian and Saudi missions here, (as well as prominent Syrian Sunni religious leaders), are giving increasing attention to the matter and we should coordinate more closely with their governments on ways to better publicize and focus regional attention on the issue.¹⁷

This fear of Iranian influence has been the focal point of many policy papers and is found in the lexicon of many world leaders. The US Central Command (CENTCOM), which focuses on the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia, often plans and conducts operations as defined under the USA. “Unified Command Plan.” According to a report in March 2011, U.S. CENTCOM undertook a number of scenario planning exercises, asking two questions:

Question: Is it appropriate to frame the discussion as Arab-Persian or is Sunni-Shi’a a more appropriate framework?

Question: Assuming a schism, what could unite Arabs and Persians, even temporarily?¹⁸

These questions are revealing and disturbing in modeling divisions among the inhabitants of the region. It seems that the Arab-Persian rivalry narrative does not have the same power to divide people as the sectarian split. This is further substantiated by Satloff, as in an open letter to under-secretary of public diplomacy Karen Hughes he recommends: “Banish the terms ‘Arab world’ and ‘Muslim world’ from America’s diplomatic lexicon.”¹⁹

This directive has largely been adopted in much of the recent Western media reporting on Syria. Early in the conflict, the battling groups were

the “Ba’athist Syrian government/regime” and the “opposition/rebels.” As the conflict developed, it became the “regime versus the ‘opposition’ including the Free Syrian Army (FSA).” Today it is the “Alawite Shi’a Iranian backed Syrian regime” versus the “opposition made up of FSA, al-Nusra front, IS, et cetera.” Furthermore, prominent reporting also exists on Muslim minorities such as the Shi’a, Alawites, Ismailis, and the Druze, and of non-Muslims such as the Yazidis, various Christian groups, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Turkomans. The Muslim minorities have been tarnished with the suspected “godlessness” brush and, because of their lack of conformity to mainstream (Sunni) Islamic practices, are seen to be heretics by the majority. These differences and prejudices based on popular historiography re-emerge during times of tension and conflict. It does not help when individuals from these groups recycle old historic symbols, such as flags. As the world familiarizes itself with the IS flag, reports have also emerged that Alawites²⁰ and the Druze²¹ are using contentious historic reference points and symbols as well.

The status and politics of minorities are by no means new to the area. After all, the region is the birthplace of the three monotheistic religions and many minorities have peacefully co-existed in the MENA region for centuries. The Constitution of Medina is just one example that illustrates this. Historically, when various Islamic empires and dynasties ruled the area, the treatment of minorities varied depending on the political developments and interests of the day. The Ottoman millet system, which provided semi-autonomy to numerous ethnic and religious minorities, promoted a political and social coexistence across the culturally diverse empire. The French modernized this political structure by incorporating it into the consociational democratic model of governance that was imposed on inhabitants of the Levant, particularly the Lebanese and the Syrians. Old French colonial manuals prescribed recruitment of security personnel among religious and ethnic minorities, a practice that has been adopted by the Assad regime.

Although Syria remains Sunni-dominant, the Assad regime has largely manipulated sect, religion, and ethnicity as a matter of control and survival. It has often done so under the guise of nationalism and secularism. Although pan-Arab socialist ideology via Ba’athism was pushed in post-colonial Syria, hidden forms of sectarianism often surfaced under the reign of the Assad regime. Like in Lebanon, political conventions often dictated the distribution of political positions within government. For example, the post of prime minister was often earmarked for a Sunni

Muslim. Such allocations ensured the covert presence of sectarianism, while overt discussion of sectarianism was prohibited and/or reported with negative connotations, such as its undermining of the unity, cohesion, and strength of Arab identity and nationalism. This was not found exclusively within Syria, but commonly noted throughout many Arab countries during the 1940s to 1960s. The governments of Syria and Iraq, and to a lesser degree Egypt and Libya, maintained this practice until recent events shook their respective nations. Yet despite their attempts to establish and/or strengthen nation-building narratives in a post-independence era, they largely failed to overcome the pre-existing primordial divisions based on ethnicity and religion and promote policies of integration to counter these long-established resilient group identifiers. These were only strengthened when Arab nationalism and other experiments with foreign ideologies failed to bring the inhabitants out of their slumber, while modernization and globalization seemed to give many a sense of powerlessness and moral decline.

Sectarianism seemed more overt following the failed Hama uprising of 1982 by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. According to Mohammad Dibo, the Assad Ba'athist regime took advantage of sectarianism in three ways: first, by presenting "itself as the only guarantor against sectarianism;" second, by strengthening its ties with the minorities; and third, by tarnishing "the reputation of dissidents and opposition groups."²² The regime used hard and soft power tactics to enhance and entrench the ruling elite's dominant position.

In the conflict today, the regime has attempted to promote a "coalition of minorities" by pressuring and scaring the Christian, Druze, and Turkoman communities into backing the regime and its supporters in the fight against IS and the Syrian opposition at large. Some members of these minorities have remained loyal to the Ba'athists through a mixture of patronage networks, the "popular committees",²³ fear of massacre at the hands of extremists, and ideological and political loyalty. The increasing pattern in many countries that experienced the Arab Spring was a turn against members of various ethnic and religious minorities, as evidenced in the case of the Egyptian Copts.

Many minorities in the MENA nations must either remain loyal to the autocrat they know or risk the uncertainty of new rulers. The events of the last decade in neighboring Iraq have not brought much hope. This real fear has been exploited by the regime in Syria over the last 5 years. Not only has the Syrian regime needed to manage diverse minorities within

its own borders, but it has also had to consider the coreligionists found in neighboring countries where borders are porous. Further, the connections Syrians have with their respective diaspora communities also require a tactical approach. This in turn has “resulted in the regime engaging external organizations in an attempt not only to influence its own internal minority populations, but also pursue foreign policy interests.”²⁴ For instance, it was reported that the conference held in Washington, D.C., in September 2014 by the In Defense of Christians organization—which aimed to “empower the Middle Eastern Christian Diaspora and energize the American people to stand in solidarity for the protection and preservation of Christians in the Middle East”—was partly funded and organized by several wealthy pro-Assad and pro-Hezbollah Christian businessmen from Syria and Lebanon.²⁵ The reach of Assad’s regime thus extends beyond the perimeters of its borders.

Research in the field of international relations can explain the impact of civil war on minority groups. Conflicts “raise the political salience of security issues, and also the salience of those issues surrounding the conflict.”²⁶ Obviously, violence creates security threats, which in turn increase prejudice, tension, and aggression toward others who are deemed to be in the “out-group” or a threat to the group in question. Tension over access and distribution of resources, services, and political representation also dominate people’s behavior and decision-making processes. For instance, the loss of power for the Alawites in Syria will have a detrimental effect on the group, its decision-making processes, and its survivability, as highlighted in the following passage taken from an interview in Deraa in June 2012:

The Alawite situation is difficult. Where would they go if the regime fell? They want a solution. For Alawites, the security services meant a source of employment. Alawite villages are very poor and those were the only jobs available.²⁷

The spread of conflict is not necessarily determined by the actions of the ethnic group, the state, or opposition groups, but may well be “a product of threat perception and interaction” between the group and others.²⁸ Steven Wilkinson goes further, arguing that “ethnic conflicts are provoked by political entrepreneurs to mobilize constituents around one ethnic identity rather than another.”²⁹ This can certainly be seen in the tactics adopted by IS—Sunni Islam as interpreted and applied by IS—that therefore exclude many moderate Syrian (and Iraqi) Sunnis.

As noted earlier, the international community and scholars have proposed the creation of semi-autonomous safe zones, yet these zones are not to protect Syrians at large but rather specific ethnic enclaves—thus these proposals are dubbed as “enclave strategy.”³⁰ This in turn polarizes and further entrenches ethnic divisions within Syrian society, which may stabilize the country in the short-to-medium term but, if done poorly, will impinge Syria’s transition in a post-conflict environment, especially if segregation, distrust, and fear dominate. In fact, partitions can “activate dormant fault lines.”³¹ Nicholas Sambanis and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl have argued that by examining 180 civil wars since 1945, in which between 14 and 24 partitions took place, they have found no evidence “that partitions prevent the recurrence of war,” concluding, “the data simply do not support the view that partitions are a good solution to ethnic or sectarian civil wars.”³² If this is the case, then it is highly probable that fragmentation of Syria or Iraq into ethnic enclaves will not stop conflict in the future.

Furthermore, the modern MENA region is not known for its reconciliation undertakings. If both Lebanon and Iraq’s postwar experiences are any example, attempts at nation-building and healing will take generational change, patience, integration, and policy perseverance. Recent years demonstrated how *not* to do it in the case of Iraq under Prime Minister Maliki. By failing to act on reconciliation immediately after an appropriate turning point, hatred, divisions, and mistrust dominate because individuals within their respective groups will focus on differences and therefore reduce affiliation to the nation state.³³

THE POLITICS OF MINORITIES

Ethnic-based conflict spreads over borders when ethnic groups perceive a threat to members of that same ethnic group residing in a neighboring country. This repression changes the ethnic groups’ security situation within the state and can result in violence and thus ethnic conflict.³⁴ Since the onset of the Syrian conflict, there has been widespread concern that neighboring Lebanon would be most affected because of its ethnic diversity. It was feared that the Syrian refugee intake and the spillover of the conflict into Lebanon would upset its precarious sectarian balance due to the overt backing or opposition of opposing camps in the Syrian conflict. Although Lebanon has remained neutral in the current Syrian conflict, its various confessional groups have entered the battle. Altercations have occurred in key Lebanese cities such as Beirut, Sidon, and Tripoli, where

tensions are high between the Sunnis who back the Syrian rebels and the Alawites who support the Assad regime and its Hezbollah allies. Reports of arms smuggling have emerged,³⁵ and anti-Assad opponents have been kidnapped at Lebanese border villages, whilst Hezbollah's Shi'a rival, Amal, jockeys for power in a post-Assad period. In the beginning, the Druze factions in Lebanon were divided on the Syria conflict. Walid Jumblatt drifted to the anti-Assad camp while Talal Arslan and Wiam Wahhab have been openly supportive of the Syrian president. The same divisions are found among the Lebanese Christian leaders—Michel Aoun supporting his Hezbollah and Syrian government allies, while Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces, is found in the anti-regime camp.

These political positions can be interpreted in one of two ways. Support for each camp could simply be based on ideological and political lines. Alternatively, these three minorities—who have played significant roles in the political history of Lebanon—could be preparing themselves for future Syrian regime change. All three communal groups have been persecuted in the past, and one tactic historically adopted by minorities has been to have members aligned in both camps, ensuring survival of the group in alliance with a future winner, albeit with diminished numbers. Generally, minorities in Lebanon and surrounding countries have managed to survive in the region for centuries because of strategic accommodationist choices and alliances. Yet, the threat has not been as worrying as it is today.

In the meantime, it serves the interests of both the Americans and the Saudis not to have a fragile or failed Lebanon, and this has been backed not only in words—"the US commitment to a stable, sovereign and independent Lebanon"³⁶—but also in action, for example with the injection of Saudi funds to prop up the Lebanese army, counter radicalization within Lebanon, and stop terrorist activity entering the country through Syria. Regional alliances have also been paramount for the survival of the Syrian regime. It has relied heavily on its ally Hezbollah, as well as its alliances with Iran, Russia, and—to a lesser degree—China. The regime has battled ruthlessly to retain control of a territorial belt starting at the southwestern axis along the Lebanese border through Damascus, Homs, and its heartland on the Mediterranean coast. Adjacent to this corridor is the eastern Lebanese Beqaa plain, essentially controlled by Hezbollah.

The Shi'a, and the role of Hezbollah in particular, have placed Lebanon's Shi'a community in a precarious situation. The fall of the Syrian regime would have a detrimental impact on the "Shi'a axis" (from Tehran to southern Lebanon). It is not unreasonable to assume that a Sunni victory in Syria would result in coordinated revenge in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon,

with the goal of undoing Shi'a political gains of the last decade and potentially returning the status of Shi'a groups within these countries to that of a controlled minority with lesser rights and resources. The impact on Lebanon will be determined by the importance of Hezbollah to Iran and how far it is willing to maintain its support for this organization.

If an IS "Sunni" victory in Syria transpires, it may result in alliances between Iraq and Lebanon's besieged Sunni communities, which in turn may be seen as an "Arab" threat to neighboring Turkey. Jordan, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and most Gulf states would be inclined to back alternative winners in Syria. This may in turn cause a division between Gulf financial backers of IS and the Gulf monarchs, which may ultimately lead to instability within the Gulf region itself. It is more than likely that an IS-dominated Levant would target Kurdish interests and attempt to counter the establishment of a Kurdistan region.

If Western political and media actors allow sectarian dimensions to dominate the understanding of the conflict, sectarian messages from minority groups in the region (and, indeed, in Western societies) will be amplified. Consequently, "identity politics become the dominant trope through which the struggle for power on both a local and national level is carried out."³⁷ Moderate leaders in turn have difficulty remaining secular and politically pragmatic, whilst their more divisive sectarian communal counterparts become more popular. This then makes it more difficult for secular or ecumenical voices to succeed with cross-communal efforts and alliances. This vicious cycle fulfills Yinon's Zionist vision for Israel's neighbors. Therefore, although the Israelis, Saudis, and Iranians may not necessarily be directly feeding the situation this rhetoric, their visions and indirect support have inflamed sectarian minority tensions.

The disintegration of national identities in the MENA region begs the question of whether the boundaries imposed colonially need to be rectified. Whether such an outcome would serve the people of the region or not, it would be claimed as justification of Orientalist "experts" who argue that Arabs are not capable of successfully manifesting pluralistic, democratic states and that therefore "there is no choice but to let the modern countries—those whose boundaries were set by colonialism—collapse and break up into small states, each based on one homogeneous group. Allowing the residents of these states to decide for themselves the group upon which to build the future state is the important element in this process."³⁸ The sincerity of these conclusions must be questioned, especially when the aforementioned imperialistic geopolitical ambitions come to light.

GEOPOLITICS

A further problem arises when considering these policy objectives. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has also called for the redrawing of borders along sectarian, ethnic, tribal, or national lines, arguing it will diminish the “political/military reach of key Arab states and enable the West to reassert its rapidly diminishing control over the region.”³⁹ Thus whether it is by implementing the “third option” (as it is known), or whether it is in the form of “soft partition” or “by separating the population,”⁴⁰ this approach means the end of the nation-states we know today as Syria and Iraq.⁴¹ Although most world leaders refer to “preventing territorial splits,” the undercurrent certainly seems to be advocating and repeating this option. The barbarity and war crimes perpetrated by all sides in the current Syrian war are also used to sell this option.

In recent years, Israel has begun to change its narrative when referring to the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the past, it has been discussed as a conflict over territory, resources, survival, and politics; today it is referred to as a religious conflict, particularly by the political and religious right. The exploitation and incitement of religious fundamentalism, which is rocking the region across all religions, is fuelling the conflicts along these lines. The barbarity and racism of jihadists’ actions play into this narrative. The ongoing Israeli land grabs and settlement building are in turn fuelling the anti-Israel sentiment. Moderate Israelis and Palestinians pay the price. That aside, Israel has often preferred to be surrounded by a collective of minority enclaves as a part of the MENA region that best provides autonomy and safety to its minorities. David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, was an advocate of the establishment of a Christian state in Lebanon, noting in a letter to his son, “the Christians in Lebanon can barely survive without a Jewish state beside them, and we too are interested in an alliance with Christian Lebanon.”⁴² These thoughts developed further between 1937 and 1954 with an exchange of letters between three key political figures—all of whom served as a premier—with Ben-Gurion, Moshe Sharett, and Moshe Dayan arguing the merits and weakness of such a vision.⁴³ Advocates of Ben-Gurion’s outlook argue that Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon took measures to address this by establishing the South Lebanese Army in southern Lebanon, composed of former Lebanese Christian soldiers, with the purpose of protecting Israel’s security interests against Palestinian militias operating from South Lebanon in the mid-1970s. This again demonstrates that the use of religion as a vehicle to achieve political ends is nothing new.

Saudi Arabia's role in inflaming sectarianism to counter Iranian ambitions worked to its advantage in the short term, but by unleashing IS and other jihadists it has had a boomerang effect and will take a toll on the kingdom, if not on the Saud family itself. Additionally, by forming an alliance with Israel, could it be possible that the Saudis are equally responsible for implementing Israel's blueprint of sectarianism? Yezid Sayigh believes that sectarianism has been used as a deliberate ruse to resist Iranian influence: "This was geopolitics, confronting Iran and opposing shifts in the balance of power they saw as hostile. By turning this into a sectarian conflict they were trying to countermobilize."⁴⁴ It has been argued that Saudi Arabia's sudden turn on Syria resulted from the fact that the Barack Obama administration was not going to strike Iran's nuclear facilities—only later did it emerge that the two countries were partaking in secret talks—and therefore Iran needed to pay—hence the unleashing of jihadist movements espousing Sunni Islam.⁴⁵

The concern over Iran emerged in 1979 with the Iranian revolution, but has grown considerably since. The political vacuum that emerged in Iraq after the 2003 invasion saw the growth of Iranian influence in Iraq and the region. Iran has managed to be influential in regional developments by backing proxy actors in neighboring states through Shi'a militias such as Lebanon's Hezbollah and mobilizing its network of Iraqi Shi'a militias in Syria and Iraq (e.g. Abu Fadl al-Abbas and Asaib Ahl al-Haq), as well as sending contingents of Iranian Revolutionary Guards to Syria.⁴⁶ If Assad falls, Iran's impact on Syria and Lebanon will be significantly reduced.

Iran's support for Assad is not an end in itself. Rather, Tehran's primary interest is to secure a foothold in the eastern Mediterranean.⁴⁷ The current squeeze on Iran's economy through falling oil prices will certainly have a detrimental effect on Iran and its ability to continue to support Assad at US \$1.5 billion per month. This ongoing support may in turn have been a point of negotiation in the P5 + 1 (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the USA, plus Germany) and Iran discussions over its nuclear program ambitions. It will be interesting to observe whether Iran will provide assistance in combating IS, withdraw direct support to Assad, or order Hezbollah out of Syria, while negotiating sanctions relief and working through its differences with the West, particularly, the USA.

The Syrian war essentially reflects political developments more than religiously motivated actions; "analyzing events sharply along sectarian lines has the effect of playing up sectarian dimensions while downplaying

the equally important political rationale underling it.”⁴⁸ The current conflict in Syria is a proxy war being fought between regional powers: Iran, Syria, and Turkey: Shi’a versus Sunni Islam, Arab versus Turkic versus Persian geopolitical ambitions. The actors “are simultaneously ethnic as well as ideological rivals,”⁴⁹ and these external non-state actors act as drivers in regionalizing the conflict.

Saudi Arabia’s primary security strategy in the region is to contain and, where possible, counterbalance Iran’s regional ambitions and domination. It is counting on US support and presence to do so. The notable warming of relations between the USA and Iran, however, left the Saudis to work with Israel in advocating an equally aggressive stand against rapprochement with Iran. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia are afraid that the P5 + 1 negotiations with Iran may allow it to enrich uranium and develop its nuclear program in exchange for fighting IS and playing a role in resolving the Syrian conflict. Interestingly, in May 2014, Saudi Arabia issued invitations to senior Iranian officials to visit Riyadh.⁵⁰ Both regional powers are bent on protecting their national strategic interests in the region and some commentators argue that the best way to do this is by establishing bilateral relations and agreeing to a regional security framework similar to the Helsinki Agreement, signed in the 1970s between the USA and the Soviet Union.⁵¹ As Rami Khouri put it:

Iran is the pivot of these two political dynamics that move together for the most part, but also have one important thing in common: Saudi-Iranian and Iranian-Western tensions largely are houses of cards that are not anchored in real, tangible threats; rather, they reflect perceived ideological threats and exaggerated concerns that primarily mirror the political insecurities and wildly overblown sense of honor on all sides.⁵²

Turkey, on the other hand, is trying to contain the growth in public support for the Kurds domestically, regionally, and internationally. A worst-case scenario for Turkish leaders would be the international community calling for an autonomous Kurdish state encroaching on current Turkish territory. In addition, uncertainty in the relationships with NATO members, the European Union and Israel, pressures associated with the large Syrian refugee intake, and fear of terrorist reprisals on Turkish territory, will have a profound impact on Turkey’s tourism economy. As one prominent Turkish columnist noted: “In the real-politik of all this, IS is fighting all the enemies of Turkey—the Assad regime, Iraqi Shi’as and the Kurds—but the spillover effect is that it is now paying the price in terms of its vulnerability on the Kurdish question.”⁵³

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the recent Syrian conflict have provided an opportunity for regional powers to pursue their varied interests by setting different ethnic and religious communities against one another. The Turks are hell-bent on preventing Kurdish empowerment; the Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian governments are seeking to preserve Shi'a domination; and Saudi Arabia and its Gulf neighbors are seeking to empower Sunni groups, all while they and Israel are jointly keen to stymie Iran's nuclear and regional ambitions.

CONCLUSION

The legacy of this promotion of ethnic and sectarian divisions in the region will have a long, enduring effect and will maintain hatred and conflict in the region. Extremists thrive in this type of climate and it is therefore more than likely that an era of uncontained instability has emerged.

It seems, then, that the policy of significant players in Israel and the USA is the fragmentation or severe weakening of existing nation-states in the Levant into weak, small, and ethnically and/or religious homogeneous quasi-states. Many of these statelets will find that they are unable to create contiguous, viable, economic independence, or have the ability to offer meaningful defense against foreign intervention. There are risks to this strategy, however. Where nations are fragmented along ethnic and sectarian fault lines, minor political leaders may use primordial affiliations to develop new and violent opposition to the imperial designs described above. In an age where asymmetrical warfare combatants can utilize the latest technology with severe destructive capacity, such "minor" players could become significant regional or even international terrorist threats in the future.

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PART III

Iranian Domestic Politics and
Regional Influence

Iran's Syrian Foreign Policy Objectives

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The Islamic Republic of Iran is often seen as an ideological state that does not play by the rules. Its history of revolution, its antagonism toward the West, and its threatening postures toward its Arab neighbors have led many observers to see Iran as an irrational actor. As a result, Iran's foreign policy choices are seen as governed by its Islamist revolutionary zeal that challenges the status quo and aims at advancing a revolutionary agenda. This interpretation of Iran's behavior corresponds with the "constructivist" perspective in international relations, which emphasizes the importance of state identity for explaining state behavior. Consequently, Iran's revolutionary version of Shi'a Islam is seen to guide its behavior, tempting Iranian authorities to take risks that could potentially jeopardize state security. This was most evident in the fiery rhetoric of Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, in relation to Iraq, which ultimately led to a crippling 8-year war. Iran's involvement in terrorist activities on foreign soil, in order to eliminate its opponents, is noted as further evidence of its revolutionary zeal and disregard for state interests. This interpretation of Iran as an irrational, ideological state resonated with the George W. Bush's administration, which favored the language of regime change regarding Iran. Yet Iran's external behavior has not been consistent. Instead, it has tended to oscillate between different objectives.

The incumbent President Hassan Rouhani appears to be redirecting Iran's priorities. This is significant, especially for Syria, and it raises some conceptual issues in terms of the overall framework of Iran's foreign policy process.

Iran's behavior toward Syria under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency reinforced its image as a pariah state. Iran took a categorical position in defense of President Bashar al-Assad and insisted that it would not abandon its long-time ally in the Middle East. Iran's commitment to the Assad regime was justified in terms of the two countries' shared history of animosity toward Israel. According to the official Iranian account of the Middle East political landscape, the Iran–Syria–Hezbollah alliance made up an “axis of resistance” against Israeli encroachment on Muslim land, as well as against Israel's backer on the global scale: the USA. Although President Rouhani has tried to distance his government from that of his predecessor, it is far from certain that a real change of policy will take effect. In the meantime, themes of Islamic solidarity and resistance against the West continue to dominate the airwaves in Iran, reverberating at Friday prayers. It is clear that many religious leaders do not subscribe to Rouhani's message of change and moderation. The obvious question for observers is whether Iran will break with its revolutionary past. Will President Rouhani change the direction of Iran's foreign policy and rewrite its agenda? Or will he simply soften the rough edges while maintaining the core of an ideologically driven policy? The answer to these questions depends on which perspective is taken in the debate regarding the role of identity in influencing state behavior.

This chapter offers an overview of the debate on the sources of foreign policy initiatives in Iran and reflects on the dynamic changes under Rouhani's presidency. It argues that Rouhani's prospects of policy change are constrained by internal barriers and competing centers of power, which tend to be reinforced in a hostile international environment.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDEOLOGY

A large body of literature on Iran points to its revolutionary and Islamic identity to make sense of its behavior. Iran's foreign policy is seen as an extension of its ideology. This explanation holds significant appeal for the neoconservative camp in the USA. In 2007, for example, then Vice President Dick Cheney insisted on Iran as the main driving force in an “ideological struggle” undermining regional security and American interests in

the Middle East.¹ This depiction was, of course, a reiteration of Iran as a harbinger of chaos and terror, a member of the “axis of evil.”

The trademark neo-conservative depiction of Iran rests on the assumption that ideology holds a normative role in foreign policymaking. It emphasizes the importance of ideas and ideals in the way states behave. Just as the USA had a duty to advance its version of democracy to the world in the neoconservative paradigm, Iran was seen to be acting out its Islamic ideology.² This interpretation presented Iran as an irrational actor: a state not governed by the “realist” pursuit of “maximizing security,” but one that deliberately makes itself vulnerable to risk by pursuing an ideologically inspired position in relation to its neighbors, Israel and the USA.³

While many scholars faulted the neoconservative approach for its failure to differentiate the many levels of authority in Iran, the essential point regarding the importance of state identity tended to be taken for granted. Criticism instead focused on the neoconservatives’ failure to note the complexity of state identity in Iran. Some of the most authoritative rebuttals were formulated by Ray Takeyh, Vali Nasr, and Suzanne Maloney, who argued that any assessment of Iran’s “behavior on the international scene would need to take note of the identity politics at the domestic level.”⁴ Broadly speaking, this approach drew from the conceptual framework of social constructivism, originally presented as an international relations framework by Alexander Wendt.⁵ Wendt’s constructivism marked a departure from the realist paradigm that dominated the academic field of international relations during the Cold War period.⁶ In contrast to realism and its emphasis on systemic external pressures on states, which prodded them in various foreign policy directions to maximize state security, social constructivism pointed to the importance of non-material factors (i.e. ideas, social norms, and values) in conditioning the behavior of states. In short, identities inform state interests and, in turn, actions, which may or may not be consistent with the realist expectations of state behavior.⁷ Applying this paradigm to the external behavior of Arab states, Bahgat Korany and Ali Hillal Dessouki have argued that the “dynamics of domestic environment” are highly influential on foreign policy choices.⁸

The irony of the constructivist challenge to neoconservatism is that both emphasize the critical importance of internal identity politics to explain foreign policy choices. Aaron Rapport has noted insightfully that, “the core assumptions of neoconservative theory” represent “a systemic constructivist account of IR.”⁹ Yet the policy implications of these two approaches toward Iran could not be further apart. Neoconservatives see

Iranian behavior as grounded in, if not predetermined by, its Islamic revolutionary ideology. In that sense, Tehran's behavior is seen as rigid and unresponsive to other influences. In contrast, those subscribing to the constructivist approach emphasize that Iranian Islamic identity is not static but dynamic and that environmental change on the international level has an influence on the internal dynamics of Iran. In other words, from a constructivist point of view, Iranian behavior is susceptible to external stimuli. Anoushiravan Ehteshami, among others, has noted that the "axis of evil" concept in the Bush administration's security doctrine proved a critical factor in Iran's domestic politics—shutting a window of opportunity for US–Iran rapprochement.¹⁰

Maloney has been among the leading scholars to argue a case about Iran that may be described as constructivist, although this international relations terminology is not generally used in the literature on Iran. She has argued that Iranian corporate identity, which is acted out in its external relations, is grounded in three distinct foundations: Persian nationalism, Islamism, and anti-imperialism.¹¹ This is a sophisticated approach that does not reduce the identity of the state to Islam. Unlike those who argue that to understand Iranian foreign policy, one should try to understand the ideological characteristics of the country; Maloney sees Iran's corporate identity as multilayered.¹² In her own words: "Iranian political identity embodies different and often divergent identities, which are variously invoked as domestic political competition and international circumstance demands."¹³ Looking at Iran's corporate identity, therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the convergence of different sources of identity on the issue of Iran's place in the world is the bastion of its claim to being a regional power.¹⁴

But other interests derived from the above layers of identity may not be consistently uniform, creating ruptures in behavior. In fact, Iranian behavior toward its neighbors has not followed a linear trajectory. Foreign policy choices adopted by the Islamic Republic of Iran exhibit calculated pragmatism aimed at maximizing state security along with ideologically charged choices consistent with the revolutionary ethos of the state. Extreme examples of this contrast may be Tehran's position toward the Azeri–Armenian war and the endorsement of the US operation in Afghanistan in 2001 and, in contrast, its continuing support for Hamas and a history of aggressive and diplomatically damaging statements toward its Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf. How can these opposing positions be reconciled? Brenda Shaffer dismisses the Islamic rhetoric of the Iranian regime as a cynical instrumentalization of religion. She argues that Iran is generally

pragmatic in its relations with its immediate neighbors, again pointing to the episode of the Azeri–Armenian war as the most vivid example.¹⁵ This view is tacitly supported by Rouhullah K. Ramazani in his examination of Iran's response to the 1991 Shi'a rebellion in Iraq. Ramazani points to the deliberate decision by Tehran not to provide material support to the Shi'a rebels as purely “statist,” based on Tehran's concern with the security and territorial implications of that revolt for Iran.¹⁶

THE CHANGING REGIONAL LANDSCAPE

Iran was not prepared for the spread of the Arab revolution to Syria. Tehran had adopted a broad-brush approach to the Arab revolutions and interpreted this tumultuous experience as a popular Muslim uprising against Western-friendly regimes. Revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain fit that paradigm. But Syria was a very different case. Soon after the 1979 revolution in Iran, Tehran and Damascus formed a political and military alliance, proudly celebrated as the “axis of resistance.” Iran and Syria shared a common position regarding Israel and the USA. This shared geostrategic outlook brought them together in relation to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Palestinian Hamas organization. In 2006, the two countries formalized their security relationship in a defense pact.¹⁷

The spread of popular revolt against the Bashar al-Assad regime and the growing insurgency in Syria did not fit the cliché of the Arab revolt against Western-backed regimes, and the Iranian authorities were caught unprepared. Accepting that the popular Arab revolt had reached Syria would have shattered Tehran's ideological lens. Iran's instinctive response, explored below, was to deny the existence of a broad-based popular revolt against the Assad regime and dismiss the Syrian opposition as thugs and mercenaries in the pay of external powers.

The Iran–Syria alliance has evolved and been tested in the context of a difficult regional landscape. Syria proved itself a reliable ally in the early days of the Iranian Islamic Republic as it supported Iran in its 8-year war with Iraq (1980–1988). This was a remarkable decision, as the Arab world had rallied behind Iraq and often invoked historical memories of Arab–Persian conflicts to galvanize public support and mitigate the Islamic appeal of the new regime in Iran. Syria's decision to cut the trans-Syrian shipment of Iraqi oil was a tangible and explicit declaration of its support for Iran. This was a devastating economic blow to Iraq, as the trans-Syrian pipeline was a major artery for its oil export, and this move reportedly cost Iraq US \$17 million per day.¹⁸

While it is common for commentators in the Sunni Arab world to point to religious links between Iran and Syria, those justifications are dubious. The primary religion in Iran is Twelver Shi'a Islam, which believes in the leadership of 12 infallible imams who succeeded the Prophet Muhammad. The ruling Assad regime, however, is firmly associated with the Alawite community, whose traditions are mystical and revere 'Ali Ibn Talib (the first Imam of the Twelver Shi'a). More significantly, while Shi'a principles govern the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Assad regime has been deliberately secular. Given the small demographic size of the Alawite community, secularism was an understandably important pillar of the Assad regime. Nonetheless, religious differences between Iran and Syria have been brushed aside as irrelevant by many Arab observers who emphasize the shared belief in 'Ali and distinction from Sunni Islam—the majority sect—as the religious ground for the Iran–Syria alliance.

STRENGTH OF THE IRAN–SYRIA ALLIANCE

President Rouhani's position on Syria is constrained by the strength of military links between the two countries and the boisterous stance of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) in relation to Syria, as demonstrated by the frequent declarations of support for the Assad regime by serving and former IRGC commanders. At the beginning of the uprising in Syria in December 2011, the former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaei articulated Iran's position by declaring, "Syria is Iran's red line. We will not remain silent toward what others are planning against Syria and the axis of resistance."¹⁹ Suggesting that the strength of security ties between Iran and Syria deterred US intervention, he vowed that Iran would help its ally in times of need. This was a recurring message by the IRGC and the conservative leadership in Iran. In 2012, Colonel Mohammad Ali Assoudi, the IRGC Deputy of Culture and Propaganda, stated, "if America were to attack Syria, Iran along with Syria's allies [i.e. Hezbollah] will take action, which would amount to a fiasco for America... In the case of American stupidity and a military attack by this country on Syria, the joint military pact of Syria's allies would be implemented."²⁰ The IRGC left no doubt about its commitment to Assad's regime in the face of US intervention. In 2013, the head of the Ammar Strategic Base, Mehdi Taeb, told Basij trainees: "If the enemy attacks us and seeks to take over Syria or [Iran's] Khuzestan, the priority lies in maintaining Syria because if we maintain Syria, we can take back Khuzestan. However, if we lose Syria, we won't be

able to hold Tehran.”²¹ This high level of commitment was demonstrated in April 2013 when the Lebanese Hezbollah troops moved into Syria to bolster the Syrian army and push out rebel forces from Qusayr. The success of this operation was celebrated in Iran and by Hezbollah as evidence of the strength of their fighting force.

The victory at Qusayr was a significant move, only possible with the explicit instructions, or at least the consent, of the Supreme Leader in Iran. Hezbollah seriously undermined its standing in Lebanon by going across the border to Assad's aid, a fact which highlights the risk assessment in Iran as critical. The fall of the Assad regime was unacceptable to the IRGC as it was the lynchpin of the three-way alliance dubbed the “axis of resistance.” Iran and Hezbollah depended on access to Syrian territory to sustain the alliance. Hezbollah's political slump in Lebanon was obviously seen as an acceptable price to pay for the protection of the three-way security relationship. After all, political standing can be regained but the security partnership with the Assad regime in Syria was deemed irreplaceable.

Iran's close links with Syria have presented a difficult challenge for the conservative leadership. During the presidency of Ahmadinejad, hawkish statements by the IRGC and those close to the president were quietly removed from the public domain, most likely following intervention by those close to the Supreme Leader Khamenei. Comments by Taeb, for example, caught the ire of the Supreme Leader, forcing Taeb to retract and say he was misquoted.²² In the same vein, comments made by the Deputy Head of the IRGC Quds Force, Ismail Ghaani, in which he declared that Iran's presence in Syria had “averted massacres,” were duly removed from the news site.²³ There was obvious tension between the conservative elements around the Supreme Leader and the more hawkish IRGC commanders and the Ahmadinejad cohort. While the Iranian regime was committed to the Assad government, the conservatives appeared reticent in broadcasting that commitment. Long-time observer of Iran–Syria relations, Jubin Goodarzi, argues that the Supreme Leader was frustrated with the IRGC and the Assad regime's failure to resolve the conflict and put an end to the insurgency.²⁴

ATTEMPTING CHANGE

In spite of high expectations about a change in policy and initial signs of a shift, President Rouhani's contribution to Iran's Syria policy has been marginal. Rouhani has not changed the tone of the Iran–Syria relationship,

despite concerns in the conservative camp that Rouhani would break the Iran–Syria alliance. Just a few weeks before his presidential inauguration, Iran’s hawks warned Rouhani that he would have no jurisdiction to review Iran’s policy toward Syria—implying that only the Supreme Leader sets the tone of the Iranian Syria policy.²⁵ The media outlets affiliated with the IRGC continued to push an uncompromising line that committed Iran to the fate of Assad, reminding Rouhani that they would not tolerate a policy change. It was in this context that *Javan*, a paper aligned with the IRGC, reported the death of three IRGC commandos near Zainab Shrine in southern Damascus. This was not news but propaganda, aimed at putting Rouhani on the back foot. The deaths had occurred in June 2013 in a rocket attack, but *Javan* reported them in August, after Rouhani had taken the reins of the leadership.²⁶ The message was clear: Rouhani should not betray a policy for which blood has been spilt.

Rouhani’s attitude toward Syria appears to have been influenced by an overarching concern about the state of the Iranian economy following years of mismanagement and crippling sanctions. Syria was not Rouhani’s priority; it was a distraction. His number one priority was the removal of sanctions. His surprise electoral victory was won by promising an end to the sanctions and the incorporation of Iran into the global economy. He was acutely aware that Iran’s nuclear ambitions needed to be negotiated with the International Atomic Energy Agency and ultimately, the USA. He enjoyed a popular mandate to that effect and even gained the consent of the Supreme Leader to pursue negotiations with the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the USA, plus Germany). Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s famous statement on the historic precedents of “heroic flexibility” and tactical retreat for the greater good—in this case the survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran—was a rare and explicit rebuff to the hawkish critics of Rouhani.²⁷

Rouhani, however, was constantly reminded that events in Syria and the role of the IRGC posed a challenge to his efforts to ease tensions between Iran and the international community, putting him at odds with the IRGC. Soon after assuming office, he addressed the annual meeting of IRGC commanders and urged them to stay out of politics. Quoting the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, he declared, “victorious Guards do not enter the political line.”²⁸ Rouhani was aware of the intensity of the IRGC commitment to Assad’s regime and saw this as a liability for Iran. In his first few months in office, Rouhani and his Foreign Minister Javad Zarif hinted that they did not see Assad as irreplaceable.

In an August 2013 press conference, Rouhani clearly indicated that Iran could live with a post-Assad Syria:

The solution in Syria is a political solution, with the presence of all Syrian groups, including government officials and opponents. Of course, the small terrorist groups that organize in foreign countries...must be evicted from Syria in any case.²⁹

This statement was very significant, as it acknowledged that some anti-Assad groups may have legitimate grievances. Rouhani was breaking from the dominant perspective in Iran, advocated most forcefully by the IRGC and the former Ahmadinejad administration, that blamed the crisis in Syria on foreign powers—a veiled reference to the USA, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. In that perspective, the Arab revolution was aimed at pro-US governments while Syria represented an alternative—an anti-Israel and anti-US state committed to challenging Washington's regional ally, Israel. It was inconceivable that such a state would face a popular revolt. Instead, the Syrian crisis was blamed on external forces.³⁰ This perspective seemed unsustainable to Rouhani, as he edged away from the categorical rejection of all anti-Assad forces as terrorists.

In a statement early in his presidency, Rouhani advocated for the importance of finding a political solution:

The Syrian people should make a decision about the Syrian issue—whether they are from among the supporters of the government or the rebels. First, the others [other states, the UK, the U.S.] should pave the way [for a solution]. Second, they should not interfere. Third, they should stop sending weapons and encouraging terrorists.³¹

Recognizing that “rebels” need to be part of the conversation over the future of Syria, and distinguishing them from “terrorists” (generally applied to al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and later the emerging Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or Islamic State (IS)) was very significant and demonstrated a rare openness to the possibility that Assad may not have a future in Syria.

The rapid pace of events in Syria provided further impetus for a change of policy in Tehran. Three weeks after Rouhani took office, news reached Tehran of a chemical attack in Ghouta, near Damascus. Rouhani reacted to this news with a tweet: “Iran gives notice to international community to use all its might to prevent use of chemical weapons anywhere in

the world, especially in #Syria.”³² The significance of this tweet was that Rouhani did not blame anti-Assad rebels for the atrocity, but left open the possibility that the Syrian government might be responsible. A few weeks later, addressing the IRGC commanders, he was adamant that Iran did not see chemical weapons as legitimate: “We oppose chemical weapons. Whatever group or individual in whatever place uses these weapons, we will condemn it, and it is unacceptable for us.”³³ Rouhani’s political ally and former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was even more direct when he stated that the Syrian government was responsible for the use of chemical weapons.³⁴ Rafsanjani later denied making this statement, but the tide was clearly turning. With momentum growing in the international community to respond to the Syrian government, even the Supreme Leader Khamenei refrained from committing Iran to Assad’s defense. Instead, he invoked the “merciful God” to protect Syria and the Middle East “from the menace of America and Zionism.”³⁵

For many observers, Rouhani was modifying Iran’s official position on Syria, in order to advance the nuclear talks. Rouhani and his team did not wish to be dragged into a conflict with the West over Syria when they could see the prospects of a rapprochement with the USA and the international community through P5 + 1 talks. This meant acting as a responsible power and working within the established international framework to resolve the crisis. In that context, Foreign Minister Zarif hosted the UN Under Secretary Jeffrey Feltman to discuss Syria.³⁶ Following the meeting, Zarif told reporters that Iran had recommended Syria accept UN weapons inspections.³⁷ Recognition of Iran as a responsible power grew in the following months as the United Nations sought a diplomatic solution to the crisis. The preparatory work for the Geneva II conference aimed at exploring areas of potential compromise to facilitate the formation of a government of national reconciliation also involved consultation with Iran, often on the sidelines of the P5 + 1 talks.

RETURN TO A FAMILIAR PATTERN

Rouhani’s overtures to the international community regarding a shift of policy on Syria did not last long. Four inter-related factors helped swing Iran’s attitude back to its original position. First, Rouhani was constantly pushing against the hawkish members of the *Majlis* (parliament) and the IRGC. While the IRGC commanders generally refrained from contradicting the president in relation to Syria, their commitment to the Assad

regime and to Hezbollah remained firm.³⁸ The IRGC continued to see the Syrian war as a foreign plot to unseat Iran's ally and break the so-called "axis of resistance." The growing significance of Jabhat al-Nusra and later IS were seen as evidence of a deliberate plan by external powers to unseat Assad. The IRGC-affiliate daily *Javan* wrote in January 2014 that Syria had "become the frontline of war against Takfiri and Salafist groups supported by the West," implying Iran could not afford to remain idle.³⁹

Second, the withdrawal of the invitation for Iran to participate in Geneva II was a slap in Rouhani's face and a major loss of face and credibility for his advocacy of diplomacy. Iran was initially invited to join the talks with the hope of pacifying the Syrian government's delegation and giving more weight to the diplomatic option. But faced with the protests of the opposition, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon withdrew the invitation.⁴⁰ This was an embarrassing setback for Rouhani that provoked a surge of negative commentary in the conservative press. *Keyhan* proclaimed that, "the Geneva conference failed before it began," while *Javan* accused the UN of working for the USA.⁴¹ *Raja News* slammed Ban for being a liar, and an "expert opinion" in *Javan* argued that the withdrawal of the invitation was aimed at preventing "disgrace for the terrorists and their supporters."⁴² Rouhani himself had to downplay the setback and his embarrassment by mitigating the importance of Geneva II. In his post-Davos interview with the *Islamic Republic News Agency*, Rouhani said:

I delivered a speech at the [concurrent World Economic Forum's] Davos meeting and held three or four interviews with the Swiss TV, CNN, and Euronews. The news from Davos and in general the Davos forum overshadowed the Geneva II conference...I told the heads of some European countries that the first step to resolve the Syrian problem is that everyone should decide to counter terrorism and expel the terrorists from Syria...I do not think that the issue of Syria will be resolved in such meetings.⁴³

Rouhani sounded more like his critics who dismissed all anti-Assad forces as *takfiri* terrorists. This points to the third factor that contributed to Rouhani's policy swing: the rise of IS. The rapid rise of IS in Syria, with its brand of religious fanaticism and overt antagonism against the Shi'a, came at the expense of other anti-Assad forces. Even the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra was cornered by IS. The choice between Assad and the opposition (and its mix of political perspectives) was rapidly changing to a choice between Assad and IS.

The final factor that helped shift the Iranian government once again behind Assad was the June 2014 presidential election in Syria. It is highly questionable how a country deep in civil war, with millions of displaced citizens, could hold a general election, and the international community was very critical of Assad's cynical show. Nonetheless, even a cosmetic show of choice was seen in Tehran as sufficient for the legitimacy of the Assad regime. The conservative press in Iran greeted Assad's presidential win as evidence of a popular mandate to defeat terrorists. *Keyhan* ascribed his win to Assad's resolve in fighting terrorism and *takfiris*.⁴⁴ This was the dominant message on the airwaves and was reproduced over and over: Assad stood between Syria and the mayhem of *takfiris* who were sponsored by the USA, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. His win was the manifestation of national will and a reaffirmation of his popular mandate.⁴⁵

The growing predominance of the pro-Assad position in Iran, after a short-lived experiment under Rouhani to separate Syria from Assad, was reinforced early in 2014 when it was revealed that the IRGC had sent hundreds of its Quds military and intelligence special forces to Syria.⁴⁶ Rouhani's experiment with searching for a diplomatic role for Iran in resolving the crisis and leveraging this diplomatic breakthrough for favorable terms in nuclear talks appeared to have been thwarted. In a rare moment of candor, Foreign Minister Zarif told the US Secretary of State John Kerry that his office did not set Iran's policy agenda in relation to Syria.⁴⁷ This was a blunt admission that the Supreme Leader and the IRGC were in charge of the Syria portfolio, not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

CONCLUSION

President Rouhani came to office in a difficult time. Iran's economy was shrinking under international sanctions, seriously undermining the regime's ability to govern. The neighborhood was in flames, with the fire of sectarianism threatening to jump the border into Iranian territories. Syria, Iran's longtime ally, was embroiled in a protracted civil war—degenerating into a proxy war between regional powers. Rouhani had to decide between what could be possible and what would still be beyond his control in this tough situation. He was acutely aware of Iran's revolutionary ideology and as an active member of the political elite that constructed that ideology he had no intention of betraying it. But Rouhani was also a realist. He realized that the survival of the regime required

certain modifications in the way Iran projected itself. The country needed a public relations revamp.

From this perspective, Rouhani was following the example of none other than the founder of the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Khomeini had uttered the famous declaration that, at times, the interests of the state supersede the interests of Islam.⁴⁸ Rouhani's attempts to ease tensions with the USA and negotiate a nuclear deal were aimed at saving the state. The Syrian crisis complicated this mission. The initial maneuvering regarding the future of Assad was Rouhani's way of exploring the possibilities, keeping the option of a post-Assad Syria open, while remaining firmly focused on nuclear talks. Early indicators suggested that Rouhani's government might refrain from coming to Assad's aid if the prospects of a nuclear deal moved closer to reality. This meant that Iran would project itself on the international scene as a responsible state, working toward regional and international confidence-building. This was the message delivered by Zarif in his spring 2014 article published in *Foreign Affairs*.⁴⁹

Rouhani was initially able to keep his conservative critics at bay. He even managed to secure the Supreme Leader's public endorsement to calm the hawks in the IRGC. The concept of "heroic flexibility" bought Rouhani time to press ahead with his diplomatic agenda. But the combination of growing internal pressure and the absence of diplomatic gains proved too much for the new approach. Rouhani's attempt at projecting Iran as a responsible regional player suffered a setback when Iran was excluded from the Geneva II talks over Syria, and it became increasingly clear that the alternative to Assad was IS. External factors reinforced the familiar ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Rouhani tried to modify Iran's image through a shift on Syria, but discovered the ideological framework to have been tightened by forces beyond his control. While Iran's foreign policy is not set in stone and has demonstrated its capacity to change, Rouhani's first year in office highlighted that achieving change rests on the favorable convergence of internal and external factors to relax the ideological framework within which the president operates.

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Iran's Relations with Afghanistan's National Unity Government

Bruce Koepke

With the conclusion of Afghanistan's peaceful political transition following the inauguration of the new national unity government under President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah on September 29, 2014, and after the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) on December 31, 2014, the country will have reached important milestones in its reconstruction process. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) are now assuming the lead in protecting the civilian population, and Afghanistan's near-term future will therefore be primarily shaped by the government's management of security, peace and reconciliation, the economy, and its relationship with its neighbors.

During the 2015–2024 “Transformation Decade,” Afghanistan will continue its process of stabilization and democratization and aim to further its economic development, while at the same time drawing more on its relationships with its neighbors. At the October 31, 2014, Heart of Asia Conference in Beijing, President Ghani pointed out that Afghanistan's immediate six neighbors form his country's first circle of regional cooperation.¹ In this context, and in view of the Islamic Republic of Iran's long-standing provision of support to Afghanistan over the last 35 years,² the Iranian government will undoubtedly also seek to maintain, if not strengthen, its political, cultural, and social influence over its eastern neighbor in order to secure its own national security and geopolitical position.

Iran's engagement with Afghanistan will support its goal of consolidating itself as a regional power. The government under President Hassan Rouhani is currently in a strong position to cooperate constructively with the international community—especially the USA—on the stabilization of Afghanistan and its neighborhood. Indeed, Iran's relationship with Afghanistan could act as a political springboard for engagement with the international community on a number of broader political issues of mutual concern. Cooperation between the two Islamic republics is, therefore, anticipated to increase from 2015 onwards, even more so once the security environment improves. Against the backdrop of Afghanistan's newly formed national unity government, the end of the security transition, and the signing of a nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5 + 1 (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the USA, plus Germany) in July 2015, this chapter reviews the bilateral policies of Afghanistan and Iran and assesses their likely future concerns and directions.

AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan and Iran share a 582-mile border as well as many important historical, cultural, linguistic, economic, ethnic, and religious ties. For Afghanistan, Iran is an important source of a range of essential products, such as fuel, electricity, food, pharmaceuticals, and chemicals, and is a significant site of pilgrimage for its Shi'as.

The Afghan government remains indebted to Iran for its support of the *mujahideen* during the war against the Soviets (1979–1989), then to the Burhanuddin Rabbani presidency (1992–2001) and the Northern Alliance in confronting the Taliban. Since the beginning of Afghanistan's protracted conflict, more than three decades ago, waves of refugees have sought asylum across its western border. In addition to around one million documented Afghan refugees,³ a comparable number of undocumented Afghans work illegally in Iran. The opportunity for these migrant workers to transmit financial remittances to their families in employment-scarce Afghanistan is extremely critical. These transfers represent a significant proportion of Afghanistan's economy and a safety net for many communities and families, without which more Afghans would face impoverishment and potentially be drawn into the insurgency or criminal activities.⁴

Since many areas of Afghanistan remain relatively insecure, and in view of 2014's record-high number of civilians killed and injured since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001,⁵ the return of even thousands of Afghans

from Iran would heavily strain the fragile democracy. The Iranian government's continued hosting of refugees and its tolerance of undocumented Afghans have therefore eased the pressure on Afghan ministries to provide essential services to their citizens.

Overall, Afghanistan is not well-positioned to oppose or overtly disagree with its powerful western neighbor. This was noted, for example, on November 5, 2014, following Iran's announcement of its plan to ask 450,000 Afghan refugees with temporary passports to return to Afghanistan. President Ghani immediately deployed a high-level delegation to Iran led by Deputy Chief Executive Mohammad Mohaqiq, who on December 12, was able to negotiate an extension of Afghan refugee visas for an additional 6 months,⁶ with a promise to present refugee repatriation plans within 2 months. The Afghan government has also periodically expressed its concerns about matters such as the difficulties Afghans face in obtaining Iranian visas and the high number of Afghans sentenced to death in Iran on drug-related charges.

The heavy Iranian commercial influence on some elements of the Afghan economy, especially in western provinces, is also a source of resentment for some Afghans. Allegations have emerged of economic domination by some Iranian businesses or by Afghans who cooperate in some way with Iranian trade and investment.

Some sectarian tensions have also been reported in Afghanistan, for example, in Kabul, Sar-i Pul, and Mazar-e Sharif, although there is no generalizable pattern. With the exception of the Taliban period, Sunnis and Shi'as have mostly co-existed peacefully in Afghanistan. Recently, however, there have been accusations by some Afghan Sunnis that Iran is encouraging Afghan Shi'a minority groups to more overtly and confidently assert their cultural and religious practices, even in predominantly Sunni neighborhoods.

As Iran is taking steps toward some form of rapprochement with the USA and the UK, and reemerges as a regional power—much to the dismay of Saudi Arabia—some Afghan observers believe that a new sectarian proxy war could play out in Afghanistan, fuelled by those opposed to Shi'a Islam and Iran's Islamic system of *velayat-e faqih*.

IRAN

A brief review of the Iranian government's predominantly pragmatic and constructive approach to Afghanistan thus far provides important insights, especially in terms of how such a long-term strategy could be relevant to

addressing other conflicts in the broader region. Since its 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's foreign policy has been shaped by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's ideology and Islamic solidarity, and strongly influenced by the country's relations with the USA, as well as by wider geopolitical changes in its region. Iran's main persistent motives in its Afghanistan policy have been the notion of Islamic solidarity, support for Shi'a co-religionists and Dari-speaking ethnic minorities in northern and western Afghanistan, and Iran's economic interests and ambitions to assert its position as a regional power. International events have also influenced Iran's Afghanistan policy, including the sanctions imposed on Iran in the wake of the 1979 seizure of the US embassy in Tehran, the terrorist attacks on the USA of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan, and the imposition of further sanctions linked to Iran's nuclear program.

Iran has been a key supporter of Afghanistan since the onset of armed conflict in 1978–1979. The post-revolutionary Iranian government offered refuge to all Afghans fleeing the Communist regime, and initially provided military assistance to Afghan Shi'a resistance groups and later to some non-Pashtun Sunni groups that eventually became known as the Northern Alliance. Between 1987 and 1989, the Iranian government was involved in the resolution of disputes among feuding armed Afghan Shi'a factions and encouraged them to support a political rather than military solution. This has remained a fundamental emphasis of Iran's policy on Afghanistan. Under President Mohammad Khatami, the Iranian government advocated détente and dialogue with the international community and supported the process of state-building in Afghanistan. In fact, during the final period of Taliban rule—especially after the September 11 attacks—Iran was actively and openly cooperating with the international community, including the USA, to find pragmatic ways of implementing durable peace in Afghanistan.⁷ Iran provided political as well as some intelligence and logistical cooperation to the USA in an effort to oust the Taliban.⁸

The Iranian government committed US \$560 million for Afghanistan's political and economic reconstruction between 2002 and 2007, and around US \$40 million per year since then. Bilateral economic relations between the two countries have continued to improve but, at the same time, undoubtedly reflect Iran's economic might. Iran's trade exports to Afghanistan currently exceed US \$2 billion per year.⁹ Iran's priorities since 2002 have been economic aid in such areas as road construction, energy and health care, assistance in cultural and educational sectors, and support to refugees and counter-narcotic activities.

Iran's overarching policy on Afghanistan has been to support the Hamid Karzai and now the Ghani administrations, to respect Afghanistan's sovereignty, to develop cordial neighborly relations, and to encourage bilateral economic progress. Iran's concern about the potential for a military strike, launched from the USA and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bases in Afghanistan, in retaliation for its intransigence over its nuclear program remains, however, undiminished. Regional counter-narcotics and security issues, in particular the rise of radical Salafist groups such as the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, or IS as well as competition with Saudi Arabia over guardianship of the Islamic community and regional dominance, are further critical influences.

IRAN'S SECURITY AND RECONCILIATION CONCERNS

The overthrow of the Taliban in November 2001 and the attempt to eliminate al-Qaeda in Afghanistan—two regional radical Sunni entities perceived by Iran as hostile to its national interests—followed by the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq two years later facilitated Iran's ascent as a serious player in wider Central Asia and the Middle East. The defeat of the Taliban created a favorable political environment for the Iranian government, whose embassy in Kabul had been closed since 1997. Iran no doubt hoped that the US intervention would be short-lived, and it most likely never anticipated that foreign troops would remain in Afghanistan for more than a decade. Not wishing to see Afghanistan slide back into civil war as it had after the Soviet troop withdrawal in 1989, Iran was initially tolerant of ISAF's presence in Kabul.¹⁰ It appreciated ISAF's value in providing necessary security for the nascent government and training for Afghan security forces, but hoped that foreign troops would depart once the Taliban and al-Qaeda were defeated. In October 2003, when ISAF's mandate was extended to cover all provinces, Iran began to perceive the foreign military troops near its borders as a threat to its security.¹¹ But Iran nevertheless continued to concede the need for professional security training in order to realize the "Afghanization of Afghanistan" and to implicitly safeguard Iran's own security.¹²

Iran's concern about the presence on Afghan soil of foreign military bases and troops and its opposition to a long-term Afghan–USA strategic security agreement was a key policy directive under former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and remains so under President Rouhani. Allegedly, financial incentives were given to Afghan parliamentarians,

senior officials in the Afghan President's Office, and Iranian-supported Afghan media outlets to persuade former President Karzai not to sign a security agreement with the USA.¹³ Since 2007, the Iranian government has persistently demanded the complete withdrawal of all foreign soldiers,¹⁴ and since 2009 it has stressed the need for Afghanistan to manage its domestic affairs without explicit support from foreigners.¹⁵ After the disputed Afghan presidential election of 2009, the relationship between Iran and Afghanistan cooled and continued to do so after the signing of the 2012 Afghan–US Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement and the Afghan government's sporadic outreach to the Taliban.¹⁶ Currently, however, bilateral relations under Presidents Rouhani and Ghani seem to have again improved.

With the conclusion of the transition plans agreed to by the Afghan government and states contributing to ISAF at the NATO summits in Lisbon in 2010 and Chicago in 2012, and the launching of the follow-up ISAF Resolute Support Mission (RSM) at the NATO Ministerial meeting in Brussels on December 2, 2014,¹⁷ it was agreed to handover all security matters to Afghan security forces from 2015 onwards. The Iranian government had lobbied for this withdrawal for 8 years. Nevertheless, the Afghan government's signing of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with NATO and the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the USA, with ongoing lack of clarity in terms of the exact number of US combat forces to be involved in Afghanistan after 2014, will not alleviate Iran's security concerns anytime soon. This was again made clear in December 2014, when Iran reiterated its concern that "the presence of the trans-regional military forces is the root cause of instability and insurgency in Afghanistan,"¹⁸ as it believes that insurgents will continue to use the presence of foreign forces as a pretext to target the Afghan government, including its civilian population.

Meanwhile, the Iranian government has also become increasingly uneasy about the growing Pashtun insurgency in Afghanistan and the emergence of IS, with particular concern about linkages between Sunni insurgents and terrorist groups based in neighboring countries as well as with drug traffickers in the broader region.¹⁹ Until March 2009, Iran publicly reiterated that dialogue with the Taliban was unacceptable and that their refusal to compromise made any kind of reconciliation impossible. The appointment of the late Burhanuddin Rabbani as the head of the High Peace Council in October 2010,²⁰ however, may have helped to persuade some

Iranian officials to support the concept of dialogue with the Taliban.²¹ The rising insurgency made the Iranian government realize that durable peace in Afghanistan and, moreover, Iran's own domestic security could only be secured if all Afghan groups involved in the conflict found a way to share power through a political rather than military process. In March 2011, in a clear departure from its foreign policy of the previous decade, the Iranian government announced that it was supportive of the High Peace Council and its dialogue with the Taliban, even making an offer to host a mediation meeting between Afghan groups in Tehran.²² At the same time, it stressed that reconciliation needed to be an intra-Afghan process incorporating all groups across the political spectrum, clearly inferring the inclusion of the Iranian-supported non-Pashtun political opposition.

REFUGEES

During the period of *jihad* against the Soviet-backed Afghan government from 1979 onwards and the ensuing civil war, Iran offered refuge to more than two and a half million Afghans and employment to more than one and a half million undocumented migrant workers whose remittances have supported families and communities across Afghanistan.²³ Iran has also worked closely on refugee repatriation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Afghan government via tripartite agreements.

More recently, the Iranian government has cooperated with Afghanistan and Pakistan on the Afghan Solutions Strategy facilitated by UNHCR to advance the voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration of Afghans.²⁴ In this arena, too, Iran has remained critical of Afghanistan's efforts to provide adequate socioeconomic conditions to attract and retain returnees. It has expressed its opinion that the Afghan government could be doing much more to encourage the repatriation of refugees by accelerating the allocation of land to eligible landless returnees and guaranteeing returnees adequate livelihoods. In November 2014, Iran explained that it would not accept any further refugees and increased pressure on the Afghan government to find an urgent mechanism that would help facilitate the return of refugees.²⁵ At the same time, Iran continued to demonstrate its generosity to Afghans by allowing those who reside in Iran illegally to attend school and offering to halve the university fees for Afghan students.²⁶

DRUG AND WATER ISSUES

Afghanistan's history of armed conflicts during the last three decades has led to a rising production of illegal narcotics. As Iran is located on the "Balkan route," the main drug transit route out of Afghanistan to Europe via Iran and Turkey,²⁷ the Iranian government is seriously concerned about the predicted rise in narcotics cultivation and production after 2014. Opium cultivation increased significantly between 2001 and 2009, from a low of 185 tons of opium produced under Taliban rule from 2000 to 2001 to a surge in production of 6900 tons in 2009.²⁸

Iran has consistently criticized the international community, in particular NATO,²⁹ as well as the Afghan government, for failing to address the growing narco-trade, which it alleges is interconnected with the insurgency. While Iran continues to successfully seize narcotics—74% of the world's opium and 25% of the world's heroin and morphine in 2012 alone³⁰—opium production and cultivation continue to increase in Afghanistan. In 2014, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) noted a 7% increase in opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan with a potential opium production for 2015 estimated at 6400 tons, which represents an increase of 17% over 2013,³¹ while at the same time the eradication of poppy fields has decreased by 63%.³² Iran's proximity to Afghanistan's narcotics market has also meant that it has more than 1,325,000 domestic drug addicts,³³ with a growing consumption of narcotics particularly among its youth. The Iranian government implements an array of ambitious domestic programs to reduce drug demand and increase treatment programs,³⁴ and since 2007, via the Triangular Initiative³⁵ and bilateral agreements, has cooperated closely on this issue with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

While there is increasing cooperation on counter-narcotic activities with Afghanistan, tensions first encountered in the early 1960s over water rights persist.³⁶ Iran has so far not been overtly vocal about this matter; the issue of equitable water rights along the Helmand River in Sistan Baluchistan and the Harirud River in Khorasan has political as well as regional security implications. A non-binding 1973 agreement applies only to the Harirud River, stipulating that Afghanistan will supply Iran with an acceptable water discharge, but the construction of the Indian-funded Salma dam in Herat province near the Iranian border will impact this already limited supply.³⁷

ECONOMY AND TRADE

Despite perceptions that it has been consistently sidelined by the USA from engaging more actively in Afghanistan's economy, the Iranian government has nevertheless played a broadly positive role in Afghanistan's reconstruction.³⁸ Not surprisingly, its efforts have consistently targeted geographical areas that fall within its sphere of interest: those occupied by Shi'as in the central highlands, northern regions and Kabul, and communities with cultural and linguistic affinity, and those previously controlled by the Northern Alliance.

Iran's pragmatic policy seeks to improve its own trade and transit to the east, particularly with the western Afghan province of Herat, consolidate its strategic influence in Afghanistan, and establish a buffer zone against future insecurity.³⁹ Iran's priorities have been economic aid (e.g. road construction, energy, water supply, agriculture, health care, customs, and trade), assistance in cultural and educational fields, and backing in political and security affairs via support for regional counter-narcotics offices and the construction of border posts.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES

Iran is a participant in all regional and international conferences, such as the 2001 Bonn Agreement, Regional Economic Cooperation Conferences for Afghanistan, and the Istanbul Process, an inter-governmental forum launched in 2011 by the governments of Afghanistan and Turkey to foster cooperation and political dialogue between countries in the Heart of Asia region.⁴⁰ In 2012, Iran became a member of each of the seven confidence-building measures and agreed to be the lead state in the implementation of the confidence-building measures on education. Iran has also taken part in UN conferences on Afghanistan and is a main supporter of the Economic Cooperation Organization, whose headquarters are in Tehran.⁴¹

THE TRANSFORMATION PERIOD

Iran's central policies vis-à-vis Afghanistan from 2015 onward are likely to be supportive of the national unity government and will continue to respect the country's sovereignty and aim to further strengthen bilateral economic ties. Iran will support the integrity of Afghan political parties

and aim to further promote regional cooperation, especially in order to fight terrorism. Iran will also seek to maintain, if not increase, its influence in areas of Afghanistan that fall within its existing sphere of influence—that is, not only with co-religionists, but also with communities with which it shares cultural and linguistic affinities.

Iran is expected to establish good relations with Afghanistan's President Ghani, especially in view of the competency he demonstrated in previous government positions. Second Vice President Sarwar Danish, Chief Executive Abdullah, and his Second Deputy Mohaqiq have excellent links with Iranian officials dating from the *mujahideen* period and afterward, when Iran supported the Northern Alliance. President Rouhani has already made public his country's contentment with the establishment of the national unity government and his hope for integrity among Afghanistan's political parties in favor of all Afghan people.⁴² Regarding Afghanistan's security accords with other countries, the Iranian President indicated that the interests of Afghans should be considered as the top priority. Moreover, he stressed regional cooperation as the best mechanism to effectively address counter-terrorism.⁴³

Two concurrent considerations will shape Iran's ongoing strategy toward Afghanistan. First, the BSA between the USA and the Afghan governments and the SOFA between NATO and the Afghan government, which were signed by President Ghani, will remain serious points of contention for Iran. NATO's new 2015 RSM, which has been mandated to train, advise, and assist the Afghan security forces, will leave around 12,800 NATO soldiers in Afghanistan, of which approximately 9800 will be American. This fact will present a serious challenge to the Iranian government. While half that number is expected to remain in 2016, there are provisions for an RSM extension. The second consideration is that the Taliban will continue to try to find a way back into Afghanistan's political framework through peace talks and/or violence.

Iran is aware that ISAF's drawdown will be accompanied progressively by international financial disengagement, with western governments reluctant to allocate funds to an Afghan government whose security forces are unable to provide sufficient security. The Iranian government is concerned that it will again experience an influx of undocumented migrants from Afghanistan and an intensification in narco-trafficking, with a further impact on Iran's already high domestic rates of addiction.⁴⁴ The presence of NATO's RSM for at least two more years and the USA's intention to possibly remain in Afghanistan longer term will certainly continue to raise

security concerns in the Iranian government.⁴⁵ Iran has, therefore, been eager to initiate the strengthening of bilateral security measures with the Afghan government as a means of tempering the influence of the USA in the region after 2014. This is reflected in its signing of a letter of understanding with Afghanistan on security, intelligence, and economic matters, approved with former President Karzai on President Rouhani's first day in office in August 2013, and further confirmed by Karzai's visit to Tehran 4 months later.⁴⁶ While this bilateral security cooperation agreement has yet to be finalized,⁴⁷ the Iranian government seems to be signaling that it wants to be a key regional player in Afghanistan post-2014. On a number of occasions, the Iranian government has indicated that it is prepared to assist with the training of Afghan security forces after transition. This was further noted on December 15, 2014, when the two governments signed a memorandum of understanding to improve cooperation on border security and counter-narcotic operations as well as the prevention of illegal border crossings.⁴⁸

Following President Ghani's signing into force of the BSA and the SOFA, he immediately phoned Iranian President Rouhani, reassuring him that Afghanistan's security accords with other countries would not be harmful to Iran. Moreover, President Ghani expressed hope that with improved cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan as well as with other countries, opportunities will emerge that will help strengthen counter-extremism and -terrorism measures in the region.⁴⁹

President Rouhani's tentative steps toward rapprochement with the USA and the West, with the signing of the July 2015 nuclear agreement, may create a meaningful opening for Iran to more substantially cooperate in the establishment of a viable security mechanism in Afghanistan and the region. This would, of course, also be contingent on the willingness of the USA to recognize Iran's role in any such security framework.

When it comes to the Taliban, the Iranian government remains extremely skeptical about its ambitions and worried about demands for more political influence after the ISAF withdrawal. Many Iranian policymakers continue to believe that reconciliation with the Taliban is impossible. At the same time, Iran's ambition is to be a principal player in any peace settlement and to be acknowledged as having the capacity to advance such a challenging process. Iran is expected to continue to support the work of the High Peace Council and its reconciliation efforts with insurgents. Advocating an intra-Afghan solution to the conflict with insurgents through the medium of peace talks, Iran's preference is for

the active involvement by members of former armed factions who fought the Taliban, that is, representatives of the Northern Alliance. Iran's greatest fear is an escalating, active insurgency in Afghanistan perpetrated by Sunni radicals and the growth of radical insurgent groups with an anti-Shi'a and anti-Iranian rhetoric such as IS, a situation which could result in the renewed marginalization of non-Pashtun communities, undermine the achievements of Afghanistan's multi-cultural and sectarian democracy, and also negatively impact its domestic security, thanks to cross-border spillover activities.

The Iranian government remains wary of the Taliban's ambitions and is worried that they will demand more political influence during the period of NATO's RSM presence in Afghanistan. Iran's worst-case scenario would see a division of Afghanistan, possibly along ethnic lines, owing to the inability of the ANDSF to maintain adequate security across large parts of the country. The Iranian government fears that deterioration in Afghanistan's security would increase the likelihood of the rise of radicalized Sunni insurgents who, if aligned with Iranian- or Pakistani-based terrorist groups with anti-Shi'a agendas such as Jundullah,⁵⁰ Jaish ul-Adl,⁵¹ or Lashkar-e-Khorasan, could act against its national interests.⁵²

Having unsuccessfully attempted to host a regional conference on Afghanistan since 2009, Iran may again initiate such a meeting and convene its own peace talks if current discussions do not succeed. In a scenario in which reconciliation efforts fail or the Taliban or other radical Sunni militants return to power, however, it is most likely that Iran would support groups and individuals previously associated with the former Northern Alliance.

In terms of economic relations, these are likely to assume an even more important role for Iran from 2015, especially with the continuation of international sanctions, a decline in global oil prices, and the subsequently poor state of Iran's domestic economy. The Iranian government's aid for Afghanistan's reconstruction is unlikely to change in coming years and can be expected to remain, at least initially, at a level similar to the current budget.

Iran anticipates an increase in bilateral trade exchanges, especially following the removal of investment barriers and in the case of an improved security environment in Afghanistan.⁵³ Its current annual trade exchange of over US \$2 billion with Afghanistan secures sought-after hard currency for the Iranian government, while the imbalance of trade in Iran's favor provides it with leverage to signal its dissatisfaction about a particular issue

or to demand political or economic concessions. The Iranian government generally prefers a trade environment that is open to commercial development and cultural diversity as in Herat,⁵⁴ with which it has particular affinity.

Iran is also likely to continue to support the idea of regional cooperation, primarily with Afghanistan's direct neighbors. While it will still prefer to engage with Afghanistan via bilateral meetings as well as via some trilateral arrangements, Iran is expected to participate in all regional initiatives, including the Istanbul Process/Heart of Asia forum and UN-led initiatives.

CONCLUSION

In the coming years, Iran's strategy on Afghanistan will continue to be driven by (1) its relations with the USA; (2) an active Sunni insurgency continuing to threaten the fledgling Afghan democracy and generating instability near the Iranian border combined with the appearance of the transnational IS; (3) the possible reintegration of the Taliban into Afghanistan's political framework through peace talks; (4) the flourishing narcotics industry; and (5) the continuation of Iran's civilian nuclear program and the likelihood of ongoing sanctions.

Neither the USA nor Iran wants to see a recurrence of civil war. Both countries prefer a security landscape that promotes state-building in Afghanistan's nascent democracy. The ongoing deployment of US soldiers for at least 2 years and questions about the role of Special Forces assigned to the US military contingent that is part of the BSA commitment, along with the possibility that reconciliation could culminate in the Taliban's return in some political form, could confront Iran with a scenario in which two of its main enemies play a strong role in Afghanistan after 2014. The presence of US bases, no matter how small, will remain a point of contention, and Iran will continue to demand exact details of military installations. Iran will thus still view any US efforts with suspicion and continue to advocate for the complete withdrawal of foreign troops. At the same time, it is expected that the Iranian government will tacitly acknowledge NATO's RSM training as it will be necessary to effectively train the ANDSF to oppose armed insurgents and stabilize the country. At the same time, the continuing US presence in Afghanistan could provide more hard-line Iranian officials with an opportunity to use a dual strategy aimed at bogging down US forces. Likewise, if Iran were to be attacked militarily, it could retaliate relatively easily by targeting US bases across its eastern border.⁵⁵

For the moment, however, all political issues, including Iran's policy on Afghanistan from 2015 onwards, will remain linked to its nuclear file. The lifting of sanctions may be a meaningful opening for Iran's further constructive engagement in Afghanistan and for its more substantial cooperation to support the establishment of a viable security mechanism in the region. Likewise, any recognition of its contributions, thus far, may encourage Iran to continue its positive engagement during the transformation decade and perhaps even tacitly—albeit not publicly—support a prolonged but clearly defined US military presence in Afghanistan. Iran, as an important regional power, could foster close cooperation with Afghanistan and its neighbors on issues with regional security implications. Finally, the lifting of UN, USA, and European Union sanctions would build confidence between Iran and the West and allow Iran to become more constructively engaged in Afghanistan. This, in turn, would support stability in Afghanistan and its path of democratization and integration into the region's economy throughout the next decade.

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Iranian–Saudi Relations in a Changing Regional Environment

Amin Saikal

The oil-rich Gulf region is in the throes of major geostrategic and balance of power shifts, unseen since the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79 and, some might even argue, since the British–French colonial engineering of the modern Middle East following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. The old contingent of forces that dominated the region since the end of the Second World War is on the verge of a profound metamorphosis, with critical implications for regional rivalries. In particular, the precipitous decline of US predominance in the Middle East has led the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to competitively step in to fill the gap. Whilst claiming sectarian leadership of the minority Shi'a and majority Sunni branches of Islam, respectively, the two actors have increasingly been locked in what has been largely geopolitically driven sectarian rivalry, with both sides seeking to widen their foreign policy options and strategic alliances vis-à-vis the other.

Iran appears to be positioning itself for improved relations with the West, the USA in particular, in addition to its existing close ties with three other powers: Russia, China, and India. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia has embarked on a parallel and intersecting pattern. It has lately augmented its efforts to complement its traditional strategic friendship with the USA by engaging in an evolving set of measures to shore up its regional position in competition with Iran.¹ Under the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, who died in January 2015, Riyadh deepened its relations with the conservative forces in the Arab world, backed a counter-revolution against

the “Arab Spring,” strengthened military cooperation with nuclear-armed Pakistan, and expanded links with China. Paradoxically, it also shares a common position with Israel about a perceived Iranian threat.

King Abdullah’s successor and half-brother, Salman bin Abdulaziz, has signaled a somewhat more reconciliatory approach to the conduct of Saudi domestic and regional policy. At the domestic level, Salman’s initial actions focused on consolidating his power, largely by strengthening his branch of the royal family and offering lucrative financial incentives to various segments of the Saudi population. At the regional level, whilst reinforcing the importance of the *de facto* Saudi–USA alliance, he accorded a warm reception to Rached Ghannouchi, Tunisia’s most successful Islamist leader and head of the Ennahda party, and voiced the need for a cooperative relationship with Turkey’s ruling moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party. Some analysts initially took these moves to indicate a return to Saudi Arabia’s traditional role as balancer and mediator in the region.² As the situation evolved, however, an alternative interpretation soon came to the fore, suggesting that King Salman was keen to promote a Sunni bloc against the perceived Iranian threat. Whatever the case, given the deep-seated Saudi–Iranian sectarian, ideological, and strategic differences, a reduction in Saudi–Iranian rivalries may not come soon, unless there are substantial changes in prevailing regional circumstances.

Traditional tensions between the two states have been exacerbated by and reflected in their involvement in proxy conflicts in sectarianism-riddled Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon as well as in Yemen, where each has allegedly supported national or sub-national groups against the other.³ Saudi troop deployment in Bahrain—a country with a Shi’a majority population but a Sunni ruling elite—has seriously discomfited Iran. Beyond this, the Saudi–Pakistani moves to strengthen their historical strategic ties have added further bones of contention between the two sides, carrying the risk of complicating Iranian–Pakistani relations.

In view of these issues, two scenarios present distinct possibilities. On the one hand, they could cause Iranian–Saudi differences to widen further, exacerbating an already very volatile region and a major source of concern in world politics. On the other hand, they could incentivize Tehran to accelerate its efforts for a rapprochement with the USA, which, in turn, could help the Saudi and Iranian leaderships shift their relations into a higher gear for regional cooperation and stability.

HISTORICAL SETTING

The Saudi–Iranian sectarian and geopolitical rivalry, with the former predicated largely on the latter, is not new. It has precedents in pre-Islamic times, when the Persian or Iranian Empire ruled many parts of the Arab world, and in the first century of Islam, when the Arab Islamic armies conquered Persia and converted most of its Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian inhabitants to primarily Sunni Islam. Although the Arab conquest was short-lived, and the Persians retained their historical, linguistic, cultural, and ethno-tribal identity distinct from the Arabs, the seeds of rivalry were deeply sown between the two sides. Sectarian differences, however, took an upward trajectory from the beginning of the sixteenth century, when the Safavid rulers of Persia adopted Shi’ism as the official state religion. The top-down conversion of Iran’s inhabitants aimed partly to distinguish the Iranians from the Arabs and partly to effectively defend Iran against the Sunni-dominated Ottoman Empire, which had emerged as the main successor to the Arab Islamic Empires under the rule of the Umayyads (661–750 CE) and the Abbasids (750–1258 CE).

The demonization and denunciation of Shi’a and Sunni by their respective religious leaders had preceded Iran’s domination by Shi’a Islam. In fact, it was a feature of their relations from the early decades of Islam after the death of Prophet Mohammad in 632. The split between these groups stemmed from a dispute over who should be the rightful successor to the Prophet’s societal leadership. Whereas the majority orthodox followers, who became known as the Sunnis, opted for the four close companions of the Prophet in order of seniority, a dissenting minority, known as the Shi’as or partisans, upheld the right of the Prophet’s fourth companion, who was also his cousin and son-in-law, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, as the legitimate leader of the Muslim community.

Subsequently, some Sunni religious leaders (*‘ulama*), the Salafis in particular, denounced the Shi’as (who today form a majority in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan) as falsifiers and heretics. Their Shi’a counterparts accused these Sunni leaders of betraying the orders of the Prophet. Whilst both sides share a common belief in the fundamentals of Islam, this schism has produced doctrinal and ritual differences. At the same time, neither sect is monolithic, as various differentiated sub-groups have emerged within each. The Sunni–Shi’a divide and each sect’s sub-divisions have continued to be a factor in fragmenting Muslim communities along sectarian lines worldwide. Nonetheless, Iran has, in general, come to champion the cause of Shi’a Islam, and Saudi Arabia the primacy of Sunni Islam.

SECTARIANISM AND GEOPOLITICS

These sectarian fault lines have never been greater than when they are used by both sides and by outside powers for geopolitical purposes. This has become especially pronounced in the period following the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79. The revolution resulted not only in the toppling of the Shah's pro-Western secular regime, which had significantly diminished sectarian political rhetoric, but also in the rise of a Shi'a Islamic government under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a first in the history of Iran. Khomeini introduced a set of new dynamics in Iran's relations with its Arab neighbors through his stance against the USA as the main backer of the Shah's regime and as an "evil" actor; his hostility toward America's regional allies, Israel in particular, as well as secularist dictatorships such as that of Saddam Hussein; and his call for the export of the Islamic Revolution to the Sunni-dominated Arab world. These developments quickly generated anxiety among Sunni-majority Arab states in the region.

When Saddam Hussein launched a war in mid-1980 in the name of defending the Arab states against the religious universalism of the new Islamic Republic of Iran, it marked a fresh turning point in Iranian–Arab relations. The war, lasting 8 years, proved to be the longest, bloodiest, and most costly conflict ever fought in the modern history of the Middle East. The Saudis and the smaller Gulf Arab states immediately put aside their traditional differences with the Iraqi dictator—who wanted to be the superpower of the region—and took the lead in supporting his war efforts. Backed by the USA, Saudi Arabia, together with Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Oman, formed the regional organization of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to counter what they saw as Iran's aggressive posture.⁴ Riyadh and Kuwait provided financial support to Baghdad to the tune of US \$20 billion and US \$40 billion, respectively.⁵ Saudi Arabia also galvanized its military relationship with the Sunni-dominated Islamic Republic of Pakistan—a relationship that had been forged since the early 1970s, when a contingent of Pakistani troops had been deployed in Saudi Arabia on a "special mission," code for protecting the Saudi royal family.

SAUDI POWER PLAY

Relying on its *de facto* alliance since the mid-1940s with the USA as the bedrock of its security,⁶ Riyadh stood quietly behind the US policy of containment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a policy that also involved the

threat of military action and regime change. This US anti-Iranian policy attitude was shaped not only by the “loss” of Iran as a vital strategic ally against Soviet Communism but also, more importantly, by the Iranian hostage crisis. The storming of the US embassy by a group of militant supporters of Khomeini on November 4, 1979, resulted in the taking of 52 embassy personnel hostage for 444 days, a humiliation for Washington and the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter. Under Republican Presidents Ronald Reagan (1981–89) and George H.W. Bush (1989–93), the US policy of containing Iran continued with special gusto. During Democrat Bill Clinton’s presidency, the policy was transformed into one of “dual containment” of Iran and Iraq.⁷ This move came in the wake of Saddam Hussein’s August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, which the USA, joined by Saudi Arabia as the principal regional actor, reversed in a military campaign 6 months later.

Riyadh also backed Pakistan’s involvement in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupation of that country in the 1980s and its subsequent orchestration of the extremist Taliban as an anti-Shi’a and anti-Iranian force in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Along with Pakistan and the UAE, Saudi Arabia was the only other country that initially accorded formal recognition to the Taliban government. Saudi assistance to the anti-Soviet Afghan Islamic resistance groups (*mujahideen*) and to the Taliban—mostly through Pakistan—amounted, according to the former chief of Saudi Intelligence, Prince Turki Al-Faisal, to some US \$24 billion.⁸ Riyadh sustained its aid to the Taliban, much of which ended up in the purse of Pakistan’s military and Inter-Services Intelligence, until 1998, when the militia’s leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, refused a Saudi demand to hand over al-Qaeda’s leader, Osama Bin Laden, for his anti-Saudi regime and anti-US violent activities. It was only then that Riyadh stopped its dealings with the Taliban and froze its relations with and recognition of the militia as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

IRANIAN POWER PLAY

The Iraqi aggression, against which the Iranian regime defended itself successfully (although at a very high human and material cost for both sides), the US policy of containment of Iran, (backed wholeheartedly by Israel),⁹ as well as Saudi–Pakistani camaraderie, played critical roles in shaping the Iranian Islamic regime’s foreign policy and defense postures. Tehran found it increasingly expedient to reorient its foreign relations toward Russia,

China, and India, to enhance its support for its proxy Hezbollah force in Lebanon, and to strengthen its strategic partnership with Syria as the only largely Sunni-populated Arab ally that was ruled by an authoritarian Shi'a-linked minority Alawite government. Further, it found it imperative to engage in a process of intense defensive military build-up, including acquisition of nuclear technology. During the war with Iraq, Iran's nuclear program, begun under the Shah, was suspended. After the war, however, Tehran felt compelled to resume the program for what it has continued to insist are peaceful objectives. Yet the USA and its allies, Israel in particular, have repeatedly accused Iran of intending to achieve a military nuclear capability.¹⁰

Iran's nuclear activities generated more concern for Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies, especially following Saddam Hussein's defeat in the Kuwait War, which, in the eyes of the GCC, removed the major Arab bulwark to Iran. The US-led invasion of two of Iran's neighbors—Afghanistan in October 2001 and Iraq in March 2003—may have initially given the Saudi leaders confidence in the USA as the dominant allied power in the region, but the sense of relief was short-lived. The US push for democratization in these countries and the subsequent inability to bring peace, stability, and security opened new avenues for Iran to expand its regional influence. Iran's success in building close sectarian and strategic links with certain national and sub-national groups in Afghanistan and Iraq, in addition to its existing Syrian and Lebanese ties, enabled it to coalesce what may be called an Iran-centered Shi'a strategic entity stretching from Afghanistan to Lebanon.

In terms of its regional linkages, hard power, demographic size, and strategic location, Iran has now grown to be an influential regional player, to such an extent that it is no longer viable for either the USA or Israel, or indeed both together, to take on the country militarily without incurring a very heavy cost for themselves, although Israel, when expedient, continues to wave the military stick as a possible and defensible future option.¹¹

US–IRANIAN RELATIONS

President Barack Obama, while maintaining the economic sanctions that were imposed against Iran in the wake of the hostage crisis and which were exponentially augmented from mid-2012 over Iran's nuclear program, has given diplomacy priority in dealing with Tehran. Upon assuming office in 2009, he set out to reach a negotiated settlement of the nuclear issue

as a possible prelude to restoration of relations with Iran. Two important developments helped him enormously in the process.

The first was the rise of the moderate Islamist, Hassan Rouhani, to Iran's presidency, and his commitment to end the crippling Western economic and financial sanctions against Iran and to engage in a series of domestic and foreign policy reforms. Rouhani wanted to secure a negotiated but fair resolution of the nuclear dispute—something for which he managed to have the support of the Iranian supreme political and religious leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.¹² The second was the increasing mutual dependence and vulnerability that has emerged between Iran and the USA. Iran needs Western capital and high technological investment that can only come if relations with the USA improve. The USA, for its part, could do with Iran's assistance if it is to have a chance of achieving its goals within the region. These goals include ensuring a relatively stable Afghanistan following the withdrawal of most of its troops and the NATO allied troops at the end of 2014; playing a more effective role in ensuring Iraq's stability and territorial integrity; bringing the Syrian conflict to an end and stabilizing Lebanon; and securing a resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which has so far defied the Obama administration's efforts.

These variables proved very effective in moving the two sides toward direct negotiations from October 2013, culminating in the November interim nuclear deal, and the April 2015 framework agreement, which was followed by a final agreement between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany (Group of 5 + 1) on July 14, 2015. This marked a historic development, whereby Iran agreed to curb its possible military nuclear ambitions at least for 10 years in return for the lifting of sanctions. Whilst Israel totally opposed the agreement, and the Arab countries, Saudi Arabia in particular, remained concerned about how the removal of sanctions could enable Iran to become more influential in the region, Iran and the USA undoubtedly came a long way from their long years of hostilities.

SAUDI COMPLICATIONS

The promising signs of an improvement in US–Iranian relations, the Obama administration's failure to clip Iran's regional influence in the fight against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and Lebanon's Hezbollah, along with Washington's ambivalent attitude toward the so-called “Arab Spring” and its aftermath, have all proved to be unsettling for the Saudi

leadership. Riyadh has seen these developments as setbacks in its efforts to check what it regards as Iranian regional ambitions. In addition, three other main factors have complicated the Saudi position.

The first is that Saudi assistance to the divided Syrian rebels, to the Sunni minority in Iraq, and to the Sunni opposition to Hezbollah in Lebanon have not borne much fruit vis-à-vis growing Iranian regional influence. In fact, the initial Saudi aid to the Syrian rebels, whether from public or private sources, resulted in Riyadh backing some of the rival radical Islamist elements within the Syrian opposition. These included not only Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda, but also, and more significantly, what emerged after 2012 as Al-Dawlah Al-Islamiyah fi Al-Iraq wa Al-Sham (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria—ISIS).

ISIS rapidly succeeded in conquering large swathes of Syrian and Iraqi territories over which it was able to declare a Sunni *Khilafat* or “Islamic State” (IS) by June 2014.¹³ In the process, the group, which had by this time changed its name to that of its state, captured a large amount of US-supplied light and heavy weapons from the defeated Iraqi forces and gained control of substantial financial and oil resources. Claiming the leadership of the Muslim world and calling on all Muslims to join, IS posed a serious threat not just to the survival of Syria and Iraq, but to all their neighboring states as well as Western interests. Riyadh was faced with a serious policy quandary.

On the one hand, Riyadh rejected IS as nothing more than a fake and terrorist entity, as did all other Muslim governments and their counterparts, especially in the West, along with most Islamic religious authorities. As such, it found it expedient to join the US-led, anti-IS military air campaign, although at a more symbolic rather than substantive level. On the other hand, it continued to harbor serious concern about the plight of the Sunni Arab Iraqis, among whom IS has found a strong social base, largely due to their marginalization under the Iranian-backed Shi’a-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Although the latter was replaced by Haider al-Abadi in September 2014 with the purpose of creating a more inclusive government, the new prime minister nonetheless also comes from a Shi’a background. His power base is therefore anchored among Iraq’s Shi’a majority, with strong sectarian linkages to Iran. Riyadh has not been able to ignore entirely the fact that IS and its affiliates—as condemnable as they may be—are essentially anti-Shi’a, and with their doctrinal roots in Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabi/Salafi brand of Islam¹⁴ might therefore be a useful check on Iran.

A more worrying point for Riyadh is that US and Iranian interests have converged on a common desire to contain and eliminate IS, save Iraq from disintegration, and inadvertently enable the Assad government to remain in power in Damascus—all goals which could only serve Iran’s regional interests. Whatever Riyadh’s public stance, these quandaries continue to come into play in its regional strategic calculations.

The second complication for Saudi Arabia relates to Riyadh’s efforts to contain the nation’s own Shi’a segments. The Shi’as form some 10% of the country’s population of 28 million (including six million expatriates), and they are concentrated in the oil-rich eastern part of the Kingdom. Yet, Riyadh’s endeavors to dampen unrest among its Shi’a population have not paid off to a desirable extent. Saudi Arabia has continued to suspect Tehran’s involvement in fomenting unrest among its Shi’a subjects.

Riyadh’s concern about alleged Iranian support for the rebellious Shi’as in Bahrain and Yemen constitutes the third complicating factor for Saudi–Iranian relations. Riyadh has claimed that Tehran has been aiding and abetting the Shi’a uprising in Bahrain, which has plunged the country into a serious political crisis since the early days of the “Arab Spring,” at the cost of many lives. Concerns over the threat of spreading Shi’a unrest prompted Saudi Arabia, together with the UAE, to deploy forces in support of Bahrain’s minority Sunni Arab ruling monarchy in its attempt to subdue predominantly Shi’a protesters in the country.

Similarly, Riyadh has accused Iran and its proxy forces, most importantly Hezbollah, of interference in Yemen in support of the Shi’a Houthi’ insurgency. When Houthi fighters—who are estimated to be about 100,000-strong, but claim to represent the 45% of Yemen’s population that is Shi’a—captured the Yemeni capital of Sana’a in September 2014, the Saudis viewed this as part of Iranian efforts to undermine Saudi regional interests and security.¹⁵

SAUDI POLICY ACTIONS

The Saudi leadership reacted to these developments by adopting a number of bold policy measures, strongly signaling a departure from its relatively quiet policy conduct prior to the Arab Spring uprisings.

On the internal front, Saudi leadership has pursued a carrot and stick approach to strengthen its grip on power. It has accelerated the process of generational leadership renewal, along with modest and gradual reform. This approach has been carried out with two main objectives in mind.

One is to ensure the continuity of the Ibn Saud dynastic rule, and the maintenance of its claim as the legitimate custodian of Islam's two most holy shrines, Mecca and Medina, therefore making it the leader of the Sunni Muslim world. This has involved controlling internal disorder and dissent—whether secular, semi-secular, or religious—by responding very harshly and forcefully to any challenge to its version of Islamic political legitimacy and sanctity. Meanwhile, it has continued to build and modernize its security forces, equipping them with the most up-to-date and (mainly American) arsenals that money can buy. Another objective has been to placate the growing public disquiet that has emerged regarding the royal family's extravagant lifestyle, the very limited and highly qualified public participation in politics, the lack of political pluralism and social freedoms, and the prevalence of corruption and economic disparities as well as massive gender inequalities.

In the foreign policy sphere, Riyadh has turned down a seat on the United Nations Security Council, branding the organization as a “sham and useless.”¹⁶ It has vigorously opposed any form of grassroots democratization in the Arab world, supported the Egyptian military's demolition of the Muslim Brotherhood, and urged all the Arab conservative regimes, especially Saudi Arabia's GCC partners, to do the same. It has distanced itself from the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, which has been in control of the Gaza Strip since 2007, and muted its stance in support of the Palestinian cause by emphasizing the importance of civil rather than military struggle against Israel. Further, it has castigated one of its GCC partners, Qatar and its *Al-Jazeera* media outlet, for their sympathetic disposition toward the Muslim Brotherhood and the process of democratization in Egypt. Although by the beginning of 2015 there were signs that the Saudis were rehabilitating their Qatari and Egyptian relations, this has occurred mainly on Riyadh's terms.

Riyadh has also viewed Turkey's activism in the Arab world under the country's ruling moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party with trepidation. It has shunned Ankara's support for the “Arab Spring” and ideological sympathy with the Muslim Brotherhood and other such forces, including Hamas, in the Arab domain as part of an ambition to regain the Ottoman Empire's former influence in the region. This is despite the fact that it shares with Ankara a common opposition to the Iranian-backed Assad regime in Syria.

Riyadh has sought to further broaden Saudi foreign policy options by boosting ties with China—a country about whose communist regime the

Islamic Saudi Arabia once had serious reservations—and by making overtures to Russia for deals on Syria and Iran. In March 2014, King Salman Bin Abdulaziz (at that time the Crown Prince) visited China for talks on economic, cultural, and military cooperation between the two sides. Economic exchanges in 2013 between Saudi Arabia and China stood at US \$73 billion (far surpassing Saudi–US exchanges) and the number of Saudi students studying at Chinese universities has increased to more than 1300.¹⁷ In this, Riyadh's moves paralleled Iranian–Chinese ties. Iran has strengthened its economic and strategic exchanges with China, which now imports 11% of its annual oil consumption needs from Iran. Total trade between the two sides amounted to more than US \$40 billion in 2013, taking a sharp upward turn following the imposition of harsher US and European sanctions on Iran after 2012. It may not be out of place to conclude that Riyadh's approach to China was at least partly shaped by a desire to boost Saudi Arabia's regional position vis-à-vis that of Iran.

In relation to Russia, the Saudis sought to entice President Vladimir Putin to participate in deals, whereby he would curtail his support for Syria and Iran in return for lucrative Saudi investment in the Russian oil industry. In September 2013, the former chief of Saudi Intelligence, Prince Bandar Bin Sultan, visited Moscow for talks about such deals, and in early 2014 the Saudis also showed a willingness to purchase US \$2 billion to US \$4 billion worth of Russian arms for Egypt's military-backed regime. None of these deals have yet come to fruition, given Moscow's suspicion of Saudi support for the Chechen separatists, although an arms purchase deal may stand a good chance in the medium run, depending on American reaction. Yet, these examples still indicate Riyadh's willingness to explore a variety of avenues in pursuit of its regional objectives.

In addition, and more importantly, Riyadh has stepped up its efforts to deepen its defense and strategic ties with nuclear-armed Pakistan. During February/March 2014, the then Crown Prince Salman, accompanied by Foreign Minister Saudi Al Faisal, visited Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia hosted a visit by Pakistan's new Army Chief General Raheel Sharif, who met King Abdullah along with some top Saudi commanders. These exchanges resulted in two agreements. The Saudis offered Pakistan a one-and-a-half-billion-dollar grant, reportedly out of a promised amount of US \$3 billion, which was described by the Pakistan authorities as an "unconditional" and "friendly gift"¹⁸ to help Islamabad stabilize its declining currency, boost its foreign exchange reserves, and "meet its debt-service obligations and undertake large energy and infrastructure projects."¹⁹

The two countries also signed a weapons deal to enable Saudi Arabia to purchase Pakistani arms. Although Pakistan, which has the sixth largest army in the world, is an arms importer, it also sells such arms as jet-fighters, anti-tank missiles, armored personal carriers, and small arms to Sri Lanka, Iraq, and Malaysia. The deal sparked reports in the Pakistani and international press that the main objective of the deal was to enable Saudi Arabia to send Pakistani arms, on which there would be no restrictions, to Syrian rebels to counter Iranian and Hezbollah support for the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners have already designated Hezbollah as a “terrorist” organization, just as they have followed Egyptian suit in also denouncing the Muslim Brotherhood as such.

Saudi–Pakistani ties are set to achieve an unprecedented degree of growth under Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who spent 7 years in exile in the kingdom after being ousted in a military coup by General Pervez Musharraf in 1999. The extent of Sharif’s relations with the kingdom can be gauged by the Saudi magnate Prince Waleed Bin Talal’s comment describing Sharif as “our man in Pakistan.”²⁰ Close Saudi–Pakistani ties, amounting to a *de facto* alliance, are also designed to help the two sides coordinate their efforts to ensure that they will have strong leverage in influencing the post-2014 political landscape of Afghanistan. In this, one of their main objectives is to hinder Iran from having a determining role in the country. According to some Washington insiders, Pakistan has been producing large numbers of small nuclear bombs that do not need to be loaded on missiles. The Saudis may well be interested in having the right of access to some of these, in the event that Iran acquires or is suspected to have acquired a military nuclear capability.

More importantly, as the Houthis by early 2015 gained more ground and the Saudi-supported Yemeni President Mansour Hadi fled Sana’a, Riyadh and its Arab allies became more vocal in blaming Iran for the Yemeni developments, ultimately deciding to launch a collective military operation against the Houthis in late March in order to restore Hadi’s rule. This was in contrast to earlier refusal by Riyadh and its Arab partners to send an Arab ground force to Iraq in support of the US-led air campaign against IS. To gain wider Muslim-world legitimacy for its anti-Houthi stance, Riyadh asked all Sunni-dominated Muslim countries, especially a friendly Pakistan, for military assistance. While it did not succeed in soliciting material support, even from Pakistan, whose parliament declared neutrality in defiance of the inclination of Nawaz Sharif’s government, Washington backed the Saudi-led operation.

IRANIAN RESPONSES

Meanwhile, despite a public portrayal as friendly neighbors, Iran and Pakistan have not been the best of friends. The two sides have pursued adversarial regional strategic interests in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Tehran has claimed that the Sunni Jundullah (Soldiers of Allah) group, which has waged a violent campaign for autonomy in the Iranian Baluch-dominated province of Sistan, receives support from the Pakistani side of the border. In late 2013, when Jundullah reportedly killed a dozen Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Tehran retaliated by allegedly killing 14 of the group's prisoners, raising the specter of wider Sunni–Shi'a conflict even inside Iran. When some Iranian border guards were subsequently kidnapped and taken across the border into Pakistan in early 2014, the head of the Iranian army threatened to send forces into Pakistan unless the Pakistani authorities found the kidnapped guards and punished their kidnappers.²¹ The treatment of the Shi'a minority in Pakistan represents another issue straining relations between the two sides, including increased sectarian violence against the Shi'a in Pakistan, which resulted in 687 sectarian killings in the country in 2013 (up 22% from 2012), and has caused much concern in Tehran.²² Similarly, Tehran has been watchful of Pakistan's support for the extremist Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan. It remains opposed to the prospect of the Taliban returning to power on the same scale as from 1996 to 2001, when the militia ruled most of Afghanistan. For this reason, it continues to oppose Pakistan and Saudi Arabia gaining a determining leverage in the country, which could lead to the reinstatement of the Taliban as a reliable anti-Iranian bulwark.

The Iranian regime cannot but view the tightening of Saudi–Pakistani relations with alarm. Wider and deeper strategic relations between Riyadh and Islamabad carry the risk of Iran becoming more assertive in pursuit of its interests in Afghanistan and broadening its support for anti-Saudi and anti-Pakistan forces in the region. The result could easily be not only the continuation of the Afghan conflict, but also more volatility in Pakistan and across the region.

In Yemen, Tehran has condemned the Saudi-led military assault on Houthis. In early April 2015, the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, branded it an act of “genocide” against the Houthis and called for its immediate halt. The three-way conflict between the Iranian-backed Houthis, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and Saudi-supported Hadi's leadership for the soul of Yemen has generated another serious point of contention for Saudi–Iranian regional rivalry.

At the same time, Tehran has found it increasingly expedient for not only domestic but also foreign policy reasons to accelerate its efforts at reaching an accommodation with the world powers, the USA in particular, over its disputed nuclear program as part of a strategy, which also includes rebuffing the moves by the Saudis and their Arab allies. The result has so far been a framework agreement between Iran and world powers for a final deal to be concluded by June 30, 2015, along with a thaw in the US–Iranian relations.

CONCLUSION

Whatever the ultimate outcomes of all these developments, the Gulf is set for a region-wide strategic reconfiguration. A possible US–Iranian rapprochement, coupled with a revamping of Saudi strategy—which has included supporting and mobilizing favorable conservative forces in the Arab world, deepening strategic ties with Pakistan, expanding relations with China, and diminishing confidence in the USA as a reliable ally—means that a new set of regional dynamics are in the making. This could either make the region more unstable or, in contrast, prompt Tehran and Riyadh to smooth out their differences in pursuit of a mutually beneficial degree of regional cooperation. There are currently some hopeful signs in support of the latter possibility.

Although such signs have occasionally emerged in the past, this time both sides have compelling reasons to find common regional ground. The reasons for this have much to do with developments in US–Iranian relations. With Rouhani needing to fulfill his agenda of reform, and with President Obama willing to have Tehran on board in improving America’s regional standing and influence, the conditions have never been better for a US–Iranian rapprochement and a meaningful degree of Iranian–Saudi regional cooperation. In the event of restoration of ties between Tehran and Washington, the USA could ultimately regain what has been missing in its regional strategic calculations for more than three and a half decades: a conciliatory Islamic Republic of Iran.

A US–Iranian rapprochement also carries the potential for a resolution of many regional problems, including the intractable Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which has persistently played into the hands of the anti-US forces, which seek to focus Arab and Muslim discontent on Washington. The time has come for all sides involved in the Gulf and wider Middle East to promote approaches that can foster cooperation rather than divisions among them. This must be treated as a precondition for stabilizing a region that

has served as a persistent source of tension and conflict in world politics for too long. The current tragic images of bloodshed, violence, and rivalry paint a picture of the region trapped in a cycle of chronic crisis, and in dire need of peace and stability to forge a positive future direction.

NOTES

1. For a detailed historical account of U.S.-Saudi de facto alliance, see Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*. New York: Allen Lane, 2014, pp. 134–41; Thomas W. Lippman, *Inside the Mirage: American's Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia*. Denver: Westview Press, 2004.
2. David Hearst, "The Struggle of the Saudi Spider." *Middle East Eye*, January 30, 2015.
3. For details, see Frederic Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy Ghez, Lydia Hansell, and Robert A. Guffey, *Saudi-Iranian Relations since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009, especially chapters 3–4.
4. For a detailed discussion of Saudi Arabia's evolving regional strategy, see Matthew Gray, *Security Global Watch: Saudi Arabia*. New York: Praeger, 2014, chapters 4–6.
5. "Iran–Iraq War (1980–88)." *World.ology*, www.worldology.com/Iraq/iran_iraq_war.htm (accessed July 9, 2015); "Gulf War and sanctions against Iraq (1988–2003)." *World.ology*, http://www.worldology.com/Iraq/gulf_war_sanctions.htm (accessed July 9, 2015).
6. For historical details, see Rachel Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
7. For details, see Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America*. New York: Random House, 2004, pp. 259–73.
8. Prince Al-Faisal stated this in a public lecture at the Australian National University, Canberra, in October 2009.
9. Indeed, the Israeli lobby was instrumental in developing and passing the policy of dual containment. See Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.
10. For more information, see David Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2012.
11. For the latest Israeli warning to take unilateral military action against Iran, see *The Peninsula*, February 13, 2015.
12. Mehrdad Balali and Shadia Nasralla, "Iran's Khamenei hints ready to accept fair nuclear deal as talks proceed." *Reuters*, February 8, 2015; Mehrdad Balali and Shadia Nasralla, "Iran's Khamenei says could accept

- fair nuclear compromise.” *Reuters*, February 8, 2015. For a report of the exchange of letters between Khamenei and Obama on the issue, see Jay Solomon and Carol E. Lee, “Iran’s ayatollah sends new letter to Obama amid nuclear talks.” *Wall Street Journal*, February 13, 2015.
13. It should be noted that the so-called *khilafat* of ISIS has little relation to the historical institution in the classical Islamic world. For more detail on how the imagining of the caliphate has been mobilized in contemporary contexts, see Madawi al-Rasheed, Carool Kersten and Marat Shterin, eds., *Demystifying the Caliphate: Historical Memory and Contemporary Contexts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
 14. For a good discussion of Wahhabi/Salafi brand of Islam, see Natana J. Delong-Bas, *Wahabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005.
 15. Yara Bayoumy and Mohammed Ghobari, “Iranian support seen crucial for Yemen’s Houthis.” *Reuters*, December 15, 2014.
 16. “Saudi withdrawal stuns UN Security Council.” *Al-Jazeera*, October 19, 2013.
 17. “Saudi Crown Prince Salman begins state visit to China.” *Asharq al-Awsat*, March 13, 2014.
 18. Taha Siddiqui, “Saudi Arabia woos Pakistan with \$1.5 billion grant. Why now?” *Security Watch: Insight and Foresight from the Global Frontlines*, March 28, 2014.
 19. Mehreen Zahra-Malik, “Saudi Arabia loans Pakistan \$1.5 billion to shore up economy.” *Reuters*, March 13, 2014.
 20. Matthew Kaminski, “Prince Alwaleed bin Talal: An ally frets about American retreat.” *Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 2013.
 21. “Kidnapped border guards: Iran threatens to send troops into Pakistan.” *The Express Tribune*, February 18, 2014.
 22. Siddiqui, “Saudi Arabia woos Pakistan with \$1.5 billion grant.”

Conclusion

Amin Saikal

The 2011 “Arab Spring” defied dominant Western and theoretical assumptions that the Arab Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is incapable of achieving political change through popular uprisings. The case of Tunisia with its pro-democratic trajectory, as shaky as it may be, and the withdrawal of popular support from the elected government of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt clearly debunked such assumptions. The larger and more important question, however, is the direction in which the region is now heading.

Each country of the region has had its own national peculiarities—historical, political, economic, and societal—that have affected the public demand for change, and the responses to those demands from established centers of power. From the advent of the “Arab Spring,” none of the Arab states, including those subjected to popular revolts, had the necessary prerequisites, such as the separation of powers, the rule of law with justice, an independent judiciary, equitable social and economic development, and a vibrant civil society, to enable a smooth transition to a pluralist, democratic reformation. It was also always possible for the popular uprisings to be derailed, hijacked, or resisted by various forces dedicated to the maintenance of the status quo or to a specific ideological stance—whether religious or secular. These forces included those who had a vested interest in the preservation of the old systems and those who upheld ideological dispositions different from the ideas and considerations that had driven pro-democracy and liberal activists to instigate the uprisings.

Although it demonstrated that such challenges and risks could still be overcome under certain conditions, the Tunisian experience is now widely viewed as exceptional. Its evolution and outcomes do not necessarily provide a paradigm for analyzing and assessing the course of change and development in the rest of the Arab world in general and in the revolt-stricken ones in particular. Whilst sharing some common cultural and social features with at least its North African Arab neighbors, the Tunisians have been helped markedly in charting their democratic pathway by what they inherited—francophone trends from long years of French colonial rule, as well as secular education and politics, which Tunisia had enjoyed for 50 years since its independence. Even with those factors in its favor, as Fethi Mansouri argues in this volume, Tunisia's democratic transition remains endangered by broader regional issues, including polarized ideological struggles between reformists and former regime figures; the rise of political Islam, in particular, its radical and violent offshoots; economic and political problems systemic to ailing economies; and the difficulty of reforming discredited security forces. Yet, overall, deep social and economic inequalities are the factors which could *most* derail the transitional phase, with any unequal society in this unsettled region less likely to consolidate democratic gains, oscillate between political regimes, and suffer substantial continued volatility.

Many of the structural factors that threaten Tunisia's democratic transition have also been at work in aborting or derailing the popular quest for change elsewhere in the Arab world. Egypt, which has come full circle, provides the best example. Following the February 2011 revolution, forcing Hosni Mubarak out of office after 30 years of dictatorial rule, Egypt moved to a quasi-democratic period when the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood—the oldest and most organized movement—succeeded in winning the 2012 elections. In hindsight, the electoral empowerment of the Brotherhood, following a major and unexpected departure on its part from its long-standing focus on grassroots activism rather than national politics, and its disposition subsequently to engage in what many saw as an attempted Islamist transformation of Egypt, entailed three consequences. The first was that they threatened the vested interests of the “deep state,” that is the ruling elite and its rule-enforcement agencies, most importantly, the security, judicial, and administrative apparatus that Mubarak and his predecessors had built and whose respective prerogatives and privileges each was determined to protect. The second was that they posed a serious threat to the traditionalist legitimacy of the conservative

and unelected pro-Western forces, led by oil-rich Saudi Arabia and most of its equally oil-rich partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council. The third consequence was the alignment of the deep state and its Gulf supporters in a determined effort to foster popular doubts about, and resistance to, the Muslim Brotherhood's disposition to lead Egypt down the path of an Islamist transformation, and to limit its ability to institute good governance and deliver on its promises of better conditions of living for a majority of the Egyptian population.

These three variables came together to result in the overthrow of the Brotherhood; the establishment of military-driven rule at the cost of hundreds of lives; the election, within a year, of the head of the military, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to the presidency, and a restoration of authoritarianism as the Egyptian *modus operandi*. In some of the other Arab countries, more specifically Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain, not to mention Iraq, which had already become an arena of violence, bloodshed, and regional interventions, the uprisings were resisted by all means, resulting in bloody conflicts between state and society. As Robert Bowker notes in his chapter, the still uncertain future of not only Egypt, but also the rest of the Arab world, will now be largely determined by the ability to successfully replace models of authority whose authenticity and relevance to contemporary Arabs' expectations are increasingly in question.

Meanwhile, the authoritarian Gulf Arab monarchies have managed to avoid, by and large, public unrest. This has been largely due to a number of factors peculiar to them, including most importantly the durability of their political economies, with incumbent regimes strengthened by the wealth from energy rents and late-stage rentier dynamics, the expansion of entrepreneurial state capitalism, a careful process of managed globalization, and the use of credible political narratives and elite-based networks to manage state-society interaction. Matthew Gray concludes that as long as these monarchies or, more specifically, ruling families, enjoy rentier wealth and state capitalist structures prove beneficial, they will have the ability to maintain their cooperative, repressive, and regulatory capacity to fend off pressures for substantial political change. Yet, this does not mean that they are totally immune from the threat of internal unrest, fueled among other factors by the forces of political Islam and sectarian politics.

In tackling the issue of Islamism and the Islamist threat within a wider framework, Hisham Helmyer contends that ultimately, regardless of whether governments use religion for political gain, the ability to deliver political, social, and economic progress and fulfill obligations to the citizenry are

most likely to determine the stability of Arab and Muslim-majority states. Whilst religion will still remain a significant force, it remains to be seen whether a role for progressive religious expression may be found that can support good governance and the comprehensive development of individuals and societies in the Muslim Middle East.

Sectarian and ethnic differences have played out and been exploited by various actors for achieving conflicting political and geostrategic interests at the national, inter-state, and regional levels in the MENA region. This has been nowhere more pronounced than in Syria and Iraq, where the Sunni–Shi’a (or in the case of Syria, the Sunni–Alawi) divide is fueled not only by governments but also by informal actors below the state level, including Saudi Sunni *‘ulama* and their Iranian Shi’a counterparts. Raihan Ismail argues that whilst there is little evidence that the Saudi *‘ulama* have provided financial support to Jabhat al-Nusra, the donations that have been made under their influence to the organization may have conceivably ended up with Islamic State (IS), in the wake of the defections by al-Nusra militants to IS. Meanwhile, at the state level, Qatar has sought to deny the Al-Qaeda affiliations of Ahrar al-Sham, which is closely associated with Jabhat al-Nusra, insisting that it is a national organization, which deserves Western support for its efforts to overthrow the Assad regime.

The issue of exploitation of sectarian and ethnic differences has become a dominant feature not only in Syria, but also across the region, with Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, and Lebanon added to the list. Minerva Nasser-Eddine postulates that the Syrian conflict, where President Bashar al-Assad has exploited the fears of ethnic and religious minorities within Syria, and has effectively ensured that calls for freedom, change, and accountability have been superseded by violent sectarian warfare, provides insight into the challenges and transitions of the broader Arab world, often shaped by the interests of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the major powers with an interest in the region.

The Iranian–Saudi geopolitically driven sectarian rivalry figures prominently as a major factor in regional tensions, conflicts, and transitions. Iran’s growing strength as a revolutionary Shi’a dominated power, its antagonistic posture toward the USA, and the mutual distrust, which characterizes its relations with its neighboring Gulf Arab monarchies, have caused much apprehension in the region and beyond. Whereas the USA has treated the Iranian regime as “rogue” and until the election of President Barack Obama sought to pursue a policy of containment and regime change, the Saudi-led Arab states have labored under their concerns about a perceived Iranian threat and their misgivings about the US preparedness to meet that challenge.

However, despite Iran's perception in the West as an irrational Islamist revolutionary actor, Shahram Akbarzadeh observes that Iran's policy actions have oscillated between idealistic and pragmatic objectives. He concludes that Rouhani's experience thus far suggests that change may only be possible when internal and external factors combine to relax the ideological framework within which Iranian policy is designed and implemented. Whether or not this happens, Iran has been a calculating player, not only in the Levant but also to the East of its border, especially in war-torn Afghanistan, where the USA and its allies have been battling the forces of extremist political Islam since the 2001 Al-Qaeda attacks on America. Iran's Afghanistan policy is shaped not only by a desire to be watchful of the US military presence and its consequences for Iran's national security, but also by a view that Iran must ensure that Saudi Arabia and its regional strategic partner, the nuclear-armed Pakistan, are thwarted in their efforts to build an anti-Iranian leverage in Afghanistan.

Bruce Koepke contends that Iran will seek to maintain or strengthen its political, cultural, and social influence in Afghanistan to secure its own security and geopolitical interests as a regional power. With constructive international cooperation, Iran's relationship with Afghanistan could catalyze international engagement on numerous broader political concerns. Whilst a continued US presence and/or a political return of the Taliban could confront Iran with unpalatable future scenarios, for the moment, at least, all Iranian political issues and policies will remain tied to a resolution of the dispute over the Iranian nuclear program and possibly, in time, some improvement of relations with the USA. Successful negotiations and sanctions relief following the nuclear deal, as Koepke postulates, could build confidence and allow a more constructive Iranian engagement with Afghanistan and its neighbors, which would be a boon for Afghanistan's chances of democratization, security, and regional economic integration throughout the next decade.

Whilst Amin Saikal concurs with this view, he also points to the fact that the Iranian-Saudi rivalry and their involvement in proxy conflicts have substantially contributed to the transitional turbulences that have beset, especially, the Gulf region of MENA. He views this to be at the core of many regional problems. As the situation stands, there are two possibilities of region-wide strategic reconfiguration. Iranian-Saudi differences could widen further, exacerbating an already volatile region. But Tehran could also accelerate its efforts for a rapprochement with the USA, which in turn could help the Saudi and Iranian leaderships cooperate on

regional stability. Although hopeful signs have emerged before, this time both sides have reasons of their own to find areas of common ground in their desire to tackle some regional problems. It remains to be seen whether that transactional approach can provide a basis to promote cooperative rather than divisive approaches in order to stabilize a persistently tense and conflicted region, trapped in a cycle of chronic crisis and in dire need of peace and stability.

Whatever the outcome, the MENA region is now in serious transitional disorder on different levels. It is placed between various forces of reformation, resistance, and extremism, with the major powers, the USA in particular, hovering to see how they can protect their interests. There is no paradigm in the making within which the transition could be managed with fewer human tragedies and less geopolitical volatility and fragmentation. The prospects for the emergence of a stable and enduring regional order to serve first and foremost the interests of its peoples on the one hand and the global community on the other seem very remote, unless somehow national leaders, sub-state actors, and the main but rival regional actors and major powers join hands in cooperation to help the processes of transition.

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