

HANDBOOK OF Middle East Politics

Edited by
Shahram Akbarzadeh



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Handbook of Middle East Politics

Edited by

Shahram Akbarzadeh

*Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University,
Australia*

ELGAR HANDBOOKS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

 **Edward Elgar**
PUBLISHING

Cheltenham, UK • Northampton, MA, USA

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Cover image: Laura C on Unsplash

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Published by
Edward Elgar Publishing Limited
The Lypiatts
15 Lansdown Road
Cheltenham
Glos GL50 2JA
UK

Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.
William Pratt House
9 Dewey Court
Northampton
Massachusetts 01060
USA

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023943156

This book is available electronically in the **Elgaronline**
Political Science and Public Policy subject collection
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4337/9781802205633>

ISBN 978 1 80220 562 6 (cased)
ISBN 978 1 80220 563 3 (eBook)

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1. Fault lines in Middle East politics

Shahram Akbarzadeh

The Middle East region has gone through turbulent periods, from political upheavals and revolutions to interstate and intrastate conflicts and population dislocation. The reasons are manifold, including external factors and internal systemic flaws that place the region in a state of perpetual crisis. It is commonplace in the Middle East to blame the United States, and more broadly the West, for the failings of the region. This is not without justification. Washington has a chequered record in the Middle East, often in relation to its practice of maintaining close ties with authoritarian and undemocratic, but US-friendly, leaders – thus conferring international legitimacy on their rule. The US support for Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and the Shah of Iran were two such cases, justified at the time by Cold War geopolitical logic: geopolitical considerations meant that Washington could not afford to undermine its Cold War partners against the Soviet Union by expecting respect for democracy. Opening up politics to people's choice was a risky proposition. People's choice could result in decisions that were not in line with US interests.

This line of thinking has been reproduced in the post-Cold War era, this time in relation to the threat of terrorism presented by al-Qaeda and subsequently by Islamic State (or *Daesh*, its Arabic acronym, by which it is better known in the region). Save for a brief period in the final years of the twentieth century when liberal ambitions were gaining prominence, security and geopolitical considerations set the agenda in US relations with the Middle East. This has typically translated into support for authoritarian regimes, to protect US interests. It is not surprising, therefore, that anti-establishment movements in the Middle East take up the mantra of anti-Americanism. Popular movements for democracy and representation challenge the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes and their backers. This dynamic gives the movement for democracy an international angle and presents a long-term challenge to the standing and prestige of the US as the 'leader of the free world'. The dilemma for US foreign policy makers is whether to stand with the push for political openness and democratic governance, or instead to prioritise immediate security and geostrategic considerations and choose to accept (or support) the status quo. Washington has typically opted against undermining friendly authoritarian regimes based on the perceived dangers that such action would unleash. Yet, decision making based on perceived immediate threats run the risk of overlooking the long-term repercussions of continued authoritarianism in the Middle East.¹

Entrenched authoritarian regimes have taken advantage of international concerns regarding security threats in order to fashion their rule. This is a familiar pattern, gaining more prominence in the wake of al-Qaeda and Daesh. The elite in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, for example, portray their rule in terms of law and order and fighting terrorism, this being a term loosely applied to their political opponents or those presumed to be affiliated with their rival state Iran. As a consequence, politics is securitised to such an extent

¹ Shahram Akbarzadeh, *Middle East Politics and International Relations* (Routledge, 2022).

that legitimate grievances about political representation and accountability can be labelled as sedition. This is a commonly applied strategy to silence dissent. Such harsh treatment has been the stock-in-trade of authoritarian regimes and is not exclusive to US-friendly states. Iran and Syria similarly discredit and suppress their opponents by labelling them as foreign agents, spies and instigators of social discord. Securitisation of politics and suppression of dissent has pushed the region along a dangerous trajectory where the illusion of total control is punctuated by outbursts of popular protest and rebellion.² The Arab Spring (2010–11), the Second Arab Spring (2018), the economic riots in Iran (2019) and the anti-establishment revolt in Iran (2022) stand out as some of the bloodiest episodes in the region's recent history, where popular anger at the government spills into the streets. In such cases, the population rejects fear and refuses to be intimidated.

But fear and intimidation are not the only tools at the disposal of authoritarian regimes. They employ a combination of intimidation, co-option and obfuscation to blunt the message of their opponents and bend the will of critics.³ Ideological propagation has proven an effective tool to galvanise support for ruling regimes. Patriotism and Islamism are prominent ideals, manipulated by authoritarian regimes to shore up support and gain political legitimacy. National patriotism has been an effective tool in times of interstate tension or open hostilities.⁴ The presence of an immediate external threat helps focus public attention on the common threat and sideline concerns with political accountability, rule of law and civil rights. That is why authoritarian regimes often point to external threats to justify a supposed need to limit civil liberties and broaden state control. This strategy can be complemented with an additional dimension whereby a segment of the population is implicated in a foreign plot to destabilise the country. The Turkish government under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for example, has raised the spectre of a range of such threats to shore up support for his rule. These threats could include Kurdish separatism – operating out of Syrian and Iraqi territories – and the Fethullah Gulen movement, both of which are seen to enjoy the support of the United States. The deliberate obfuscation of issues and portrayal of opposition to the ruling party as somehow serving foreign interests to undermine Turkey's national coherence sets the scene for a violent/military response. Such obfuscation allows authoritarian regimes to peddle their populist narrative of 'us and them' and justify their undemocratic measures in terms of national security.

Authoritarian populism is paternalistic to the core. A recurring theme is the treatment of the nation as the proverbial defenceless sheep at the mercy of hungry wolves, making the forever vigilant leader responsible for shepherding his flock. This recurring imagery was on full display recently as the authorities poured scorn on Iranian women and youth protesting against the regime's misogynistic and repressive policies. The regime's response to months of public protests in 2022 was a mix of unbridled repression and violence, mixed with public advice and statements as to how the protestors should not let themselves be swayed by foreign interests. In these statements, Iranian women and youth were portrayed as naïve and gullible, acting as puppets of Iran's arch-enemy the United States and its allies. The portrayal of protestors as misguided pawns in the hands of foreign masters is typically designed to discredit the former

² Shahram Akbarzadeh, William Gurlay and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 'Iranian Proxies in the Syrian Conflict: Tehran's "Forward-Defence" in Action', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, online 2022.

³ Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

and justify state repression. In this case, paternal ‘advice’ to protestors was mixed with threats of severe punishment if street protests continued.

The claim to resistance against foreign intervention and protecting indigenous values by authoritarian powers is bolstered by systematic appeals to Islam. As the dominant religion in the Middle East, Islam is entwined with daily life and culture. Cultural and social authenticity in the region is represented with reference to Islam, in its different manifestations. The entwining of culture and religion has served authoritarian regimes well as they claim to protect indigenous values against cultural imperialism and the imposition of foreign values.⁵ Iran and Saudi Arabia have adopted this approach most systematically as they claim to uphold an authentic system of government. In this model, Islam is used as a tool for political legitimacy and the delegitimisation of dissenting views. Discrediting democratic principles such as freedom of speech as inherently contradictory to the collective well-being of the Muslim nation by propagating discord and spreading mistrust has been a common practice. However, the relationship between political power and Islam is complex. As often as authoritarian regimes seek to maintain control over the narrative of Islam in society, alternative perspectives spring up and present challenges. These could be in the shape of dissidents appealing to different interpretations of Islam that reject the iron-fist policies of the ruling regimes, or even a more radical narrative that rejects state-curated assumptions on the role of Islam in society.

The 2022 crisis in Iran brought to the fore an alternative narrative that challenged the governing role of Islam in public life and the view of the clerical establishment as the legitimate custodians of political power. In a rare public display of opposition, a number of students at religious seminaries issued a public statement insisting that religion is a private matter and the state should not intervene in enforcing voluntary religious obligations. This critique goes to the heart of the *Velayat Faqih* system in Iran, whereby the most learned Islamic scholar (*Faqih*) is given supreme authority over the state to ensure compliance with Islamic law.⁶ Rare and unexpected as this challenge might have been, it epitomised a much wider social trend marked by a deliberate de-coupling of culture and religion. This trend rests on the experience of the past four decades, whereby state repression and authoritarian rule was justified by appeals to Islam. This trend points to a new dimension in the politics of Iran: an Islam–society divide, a new phenomenon not experienced widely in the rest of the Middle East. While this divide presents an existential threat to the Islamic regime in Iran, it is unlikely to be reproduced in the region because Iran is unique in the way in which religious authority and political rule are entwined and the machinery of the state is mobilised to enforce religious morals.

Yet, the politics of the Middle East is marked clearly by a gap between society and the ruling regimes. The absence of political representation and the marginalisation of religious and ethnic minorities, as well as women, have created major political fault-lines. The ruling regimes’ distrust of the people they rule and the closed nature of their rule, which places a high premium on loyalty to the regime – and very often loyalty to the person at the apex of the political establishment – has facilitated nepotism and cliental relations. In the absence of open and transparent competition for office, personal and political favouritism decides access to positions of authority in a self-serving system. It is not hard to see why there is widespread discontent with the closed political system in the Middle East. The frequent eruptions of protest in

⁵ Shahram Akbarzadeh (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Political Islam* (Routledge, 2012).

⁶ Shahram Akbarzadeh, ‘Where Is the Islamic Republic of Iran Heading?’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 59(1), 2005, pp.25–38.

the region are a reminder that the people demand more from their rulers, that they oppose the discriminatory and exclusive nature of politics and that wish their voices to be heard.

The popular expressions of dissent and calls for political openness that erupted in the Arab world in 2011 marked a significant new chapter in the region. Protesters were mobilised by their disdain for the arrogance of political rulers. They poured into the streets to reclaim their dignity, to be heard, to be counted. At its core, this was a very basic human response to a political system that had excluded the people. And that is why the protests, starting in Tunisia, resonated so widely across the Arab world. The Arab Spring caught the imagination of ordinary citizens because its message was plain and simple, not wrapped in ideological dogma. The absence of appeals to Islam, or to socialism, distinguished the Arab Spring from past experiences of social unrest, where political action was often organised in the name of an ideology. In fact, there was little organisation behind the Arab Spring. There were no distinguishable leaders to offer vision and directives. This made the Arab Spring stand out. The same experience was witnessed in the Iranian protest of 2022, as the women and youth chanted for ‘women, life, freedom’.

Instead, social media platforms such as Instagram, Telegram and Facebook gained prominence as tools of dissent as protesters shared their news, posted videos of state brutality and mobilised for the next rally. The spread of mobile technology in the region meant that access to unfiltered information, outside state-sanctioned news agencies, was easier than ever and protestors could share their message of defiance. This was a remarkable experience, leading some observers to argue that social media was equalising the playing field. But such optimism was misplaced. The ruling regimes’ responses to the use of social media as a platform for dissent have been uniform: shut down the internet. While no country can afford to turn off the internet for long, because of disruption to the normal workings of commerce and industry, temporary shut-downs and targeting of social media platforms to contain news of protests and state suppression are not uncommon. Stifling news of protests and the capacity of protestors to inspire others through their social media posts, coupled with harsh suppressive measures in the streets, has proven effective in pushing back against the tide. Only in Tunisia and Egypt was this pattern broken as the popular revolt appeared to lead to genuine change.⁷ Egypt however soon reverted to military rule and authoritarianism, as will be explored in this collection. What made these popular uprisings stand out – their lack of central leadership and a unifying ideology – came to represent a weakness against the machinery of suppression, allowing state agencies to isolate expressions of dissent online and offline, undermining the potential of popular movements to coordinate and multiply impact.

While authoritarianism has managed to push against the tide of change, the internal logic of the divide between the state and society, the continued disregard for popular wishes and the suppression of legitimate grievances have ensured that there will be more upheavals to come. Popular demands for a respectful and representative government, for liberty and freedom and for equal opportunities will keep the fire of hope burning, ready to erupt at the next opportunity. This pent-up energy has the capacity to impact the future direction of the region when facing new or external challenges. This collection offers a wide-ranging assessment of some of the most urgent challenges facing the region and what they mean for the future.

⁷ Benjamin Isakhan, Fethi Mansouri and Shahram Akbarzadeh, *The Arab Revolutions in Context: Civil Society and Democracy in a Changing Middle East* (Melbourne University Press, 2012).

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2. Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa

Roel Meijer

INTRODUCTION

In Middle Eastern and North African studies, citizenship (*muwatana*) is seldom regarded as a topic of study.¹ For the most part, citizenship is mentioned in an offhand manner: “the citizens of so-and-so country think, act, or protest for this or that reason.” The term is rarely analyzed as a specific topic, except in obvious cases. For instance, nobody denies that citizenship is essential to the Palestinian right to a homeland or to Palestinian claims to rights in Israel or neighboring Arab countries, or that full citizenship rights were crucial for Jews coming to Israel, having been denied to them in Europe. Neither is the importance of citizenship denied in the case of migration, where it is related to passports and nationality.² In a broader sense, academic research on rights, such a crucial aspect of citizenship, is mostly associated with human rights: the right to life; to a fair trial; to vote, organize, and establish political parties. Rarely is citizenship regarded as part of a larger complex of politics, laws, ideas, ethics, morality, attitudes, the public sphere, the relations between subjects and the state or between subjects themselves. Only recently has citizenship in its multiple forms been given its due attention as the lynchpin of modern societies.³ These studies point out that after the emergence of the modern state in the nineteenth century, *all* inhabitants of a territory and subjects of state became legal citizens and members of a state and later a nation-state. States started to subject citizens to laws, taxed their wealth, standardized languages, regulated their lives, restricted their movements, conscripted men into armies, demanded loyalty, and instilled a new sense of time and space in their subjects. At some point certain sections of the population acquired the political right to vote. Later on, during the period of the welfare state, citizens gained social and economic rights and could expect services in the form of education, housing, health care, and culture. From their side, citizens tried to influence these laws, create new forms of civility,

¹ I want to thank all the contributors to the three anthologies I have co-edited: Roel Meijer and Nils A. Butenschön, *The Crisis of Citizenship in the Arab World* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Nils A. Butenschön and Roel Meijer (eds), *The Middle East in Transition: The Centrality of Citizenship* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018); and Roel Meijer, James N. Sater, and Zahra R. Babar, *Routledge Handbook of Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Routledge, 2020). Over the past decade the chapters in these volumes have contributed to my understanding of the historical, anthropological, social, and political dimensions of citizenship.

² Lauri Brand, *Citizens Abroad: Emigration and the State in the Middle East and North Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Research on citizenship in the Gulf in particular concentrates on nationality. See for instance the chapters in the *Routledge Handbook of Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa*.

³ See the literature mentioned in note 1 and Themassia Cambanis and Michael Wahid Hanna (eds), *Citizenship and Its Discontents: The Struggle for Rights, Pluralism, and Inclusion in the Middle East* (Washington: A Century Foundation Book, 2019).

conceptualize new solidarities, organize themselves in associations and trade unions, establish civil societies, and adjust their ethical standards to nation-wide norms.⁴ In this process, it has been pointed out that religions, especially Islam but also Christianity, provide a deeper ethical dimension to citizenship.⁵ As we will see in this study, so pervasive have notions of citizenship become that today even non-state actors, militias, and political movements can only gain legitimacy and loyalty when they provide state-like facilities to their members.

To be sure, citizenship is not in itself a discipline; it is a perspective or an “approach,” as Nils Butenschøn stated in the foundational anthology on the topic in the Middle East.⁶ It borrows from existing disciplines such as political economy, historical sociology, international relations, religious studies, migration studies, anthropology, and historical studies. With this in mind, I will argue that the citizenship approach can make a contribution to Middle Eastern studies in three ways.

First, in its narrower sense of rights it provides a long-term, historical view that can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when during the Tanzimat equality between Muslims and non-Muslims was introduced;⁷ in its broad sense as an ethical system it goes back to the beginning of Islam as a civilization. In particular, research on Islamic law provides insight into Muslim citizenship.⁸ Either way, citizenship is a means of tracing changes in subject–state relations and inter-subject relations over long stretches of time. The critique that citizenship is particularly European or Western does not hold, as the dissemination of the modern state is a global development. Much like nationalism, politicization of religion, or the introduction of the telegraph and steamship, the emergence of the public sphere, modern citizenship, occurred in the nineteenth century and is related to the different forms of integration and phases of development of the modern world system.⁹ However, it is always related to local sublayers of culture and historical notions of justice, laws, moral doctrines and attitudes, mentalities, identities, sensibilities, and symbols. The question is not when but how citizenship emerged in its modern form, and what features the dialectical relations between citizens and the state have produced against a specific political, cultural, and religious background. The difference between a historical and a modern citizenship is that from the nineteenth century onward questions of who is a member of the community, to what extent, and with what rights and duties acquired an unprecedented urgency.

Second, citizenship has become a broad and all-encompassing concept that cuts through, affects, reorders, and increasingly determines ideologies, religions, ethics, laws, communal

⁴ For an overview of modern concepts of citizenship, see, Ayelet Shachar, Rainer Bauböck, Irene Bloemraad, and Maarten Vink (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵ Bryan S. Turner, “Secular and Religious Citizenship,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship*, 478–99.

⁶ For the foundation of citizenship studies in the Middle East see Nils A. Butenschøn, Uri Davis, and Manuel Hassassian (eds), *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East: Approaches and Applications* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

⁷ Heather J. Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in Ottoman Arab Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁸ See for instance Wael B. Hallaq, *Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁹ For more on the simultaneous global developments, see C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

solidarities, and individual, communal, and national identities and practices, as well as all forms of counter-hegemonic projects that contest, protest, evade, and construct alternative forms of citizenship. If indeed citizenship is the name of the game, then it becomes possible to contextualize Islamism, sectarianism, and secularism as expressions of adjusted or alternative citizenship projects and not just as defensive identity mechanisms against colonialism; it becomes possible to determine their differences and commonalities without being distracted by the details of doctrines, ideologies, and practices. Regarding them as alternative citizenship projects to the dominant state citizenship projects explains their ideas better than tracing them to some historical origin. It also explains why these ideologies try to create parallel societies or proto-states.

Third, citizenship provides an angle that combines the insights of the study of ideologies, religions, power, and economic and social relations, without being reduced to any one of them. Political economy, for instance, has a superb analysis of economic relations with power relations, but is reductionist when it comes to ideas. Human dignity as a central theme of the Arab Spring is a good example. It is always linked to economic deprivation, but in its broad definition it encompasses all the notions related to citizenship ideas, and much more. The same applies to the more recent protests in Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, and Sudan. Regarding them as movements supporting common notions of citizenship or the “common good,” regardless of ideology, against the background of their protests against sectarianism, corruption and nepotism, and unemployment is more useful than seeing them as flawed, leaderless, idea-less revolutions.

Once these steps are taken, it is possible to trace specific historical notions of citizenship as they developed during earlier periods in the region and connect them to different social contracts that have buttressed different forms of citizenship regimes.¹⁰ The social contract can be informal or formal: the first mostly as a religiously sanctioned agreement as laid down in Islam, or the millet system; the latter in constitutions or the long tradition of National Manifests (*al-mithaq al-watani*). A much weaker form of social contract is the sectorial, separate pact with, for instance, workers, the military, crony capitalists, or religious institutions. Further down the ladder, the social contract is exclusively made with the members of the own organization or community, disregarding or in opposition to the state, and therefore with only a tenuous relation between the organization and the state. In its extreme form these create their own states, as is the case with Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹¹

In the following section, I will trace the history of citizenship by analyzing four historical social contracts: the Islamic social contract between Muslims and non-Muslims; the exclusive colonial pact between colonial powers and local intermediaries; the socially inclusive Arab socialist pact; and finally, the unraveling of that pact, the stability pact of the upgraded authoritarian states, and its collapse. All of these social contracts were accompanied by an ideology and a citizenship regime, defined as a bundle of rights, duties, and practices influenced by local regional and international factors. I will then look more closely at the alternative Islamist

¹⁰ Markus Loewe, Tina Zintl, and Annabelle Houdret, “The Social Contract as Tool of Analysis: Introduction to the Special Issue, ‘Framing the Evolution of New Social Contracts in Middle Eastern and North African Countries’,” *World Development*, 145 (2021): 3–9.

¹¹ Mara Redlin Revkin and Ariel A. Ahram, “Perspectives on Rebel Social Contracts: Exit, Voice and Loyalty in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria,” *World Development* 132 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.104981>.

citizenship projects, and in the last part I will analyze the inclusive, egalitarian citizenship projects as they have evolved since the Arab Spring.

ISLAMIC SOCIAL CONTRACT

The Constitution of Medina during the life of the prophet Muhammad is important for Muslims, and the Pact of Umar between Muslims and non-Muslims for non-Muslims.¹² The first defines the rights and duties of Muslims, the latter second-class citizenship of non-Muslims in a Muslim society. As specialists in Islamic law demonstrate, Muslim society was mostly upheld by the ulema, who were not only judges but also role models, deriving their ethical worldview from Islamic law. The role of the state was limited to maintaining the political order, defending the borders of the Dar al-Islam and in theory implementing Islamic law. Overall the ulema were suspicious of the state and defined ‘citizenship’ as living according to the prescripts of Islamic law, which they defined through *fiqh*, jurisprudence and custom law.¹³ The state could, however, intervene in society directly through *qanun* and the *mazalim* courts, encroaching as a secular, political force upon the prerogatives of the ulema and intervening Islamic citizenship regimes through taxation and the extraction of other resources.¹⁴ Citizenship was further fragmented during the Ottoman period by what Karen Barkey has called the “empire of difference.”¹⁵ Rights, duties, and a sense of belonging were highly localized, segmented, and diverse.

The Pact of Umar and *dhimmi* status of non-Muslims had a long-term influence on Islamic concepts of citizenship and especially the Ottoman citizenship regime. It is debatable whether the millet system was really a system or rather a pragmatic solution of ruling a diverse society with limited means. Most scholars agree that it was the latter. In fact, Christian millets, such as those of the Protestant and Unified Catholic churches, were only recognized during the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Before the emergence of the modern state, probably only the Greek Orthodox church was regarded as an autonomous authority over its followers. Whatever the origin, sectarian autonomy had considerable influence on citizenship in the modern era. As non-Muslim institutions had wide-ranging powers over the lives of the members of their communities through the collection of the *jizya* tax, schooling, and personal status law—even having the power to issue punishments, including the threat of excommunication and banishment—Christians and Jews were basically ‘divided citizens’ between the Ottoman state and their religious authorities. This changed during the Tanzimat, when, under pressure from the Great Powers and the need to create loyal citizens, non-Muslims were given equal rights

¹² Sharkey, *Muslims, Christians and Jews*, 27–4.

¹³ Wael B. Hallaq, *Shari‘a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Sami Zubaida, *Law and Power in the Islamic World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

¹⁵ Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ For instance, Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 176; Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in Ottoman Arab Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 61–5.

through the imperial edicts of 1839 and 1856 and the Constitution of 1876.¹⁷ This new social contract was named Ottomanism.

Not equality or liberal rights, however, but rather centralization, rationalization, and standardization of society initiated the trend toward modern citizenship in the nineteenth century. A whole series of measures were taken to gain control over the population. For the first time, births and deaths were registered, cadastral surveys regularly drawn up, traveling documents issued to control movements of the population. In Egypt, where governmental measures under the khedives went the furthest, the state drew up codes for fellahin regarding when and how to produce certain agricultural produce. To execute these measures, new bureaucracies were established and expanded. Ranks, tasks, specializations, and promotion rules were laid down.¹⁸ New forms of communication in the form of railways, steamships, and telegraph contributed to greater power and reach of the state, while the expansion of modern education and the spectacular growth of port cities created a modern public sphere and political participation. Although often regarded as a cultural revival, it was especially with regard to notions of shared citizenship that the Nahda produced a revolution by reforming the language, terminology, and self-definitions of the individual and the rights and duties of citizens.¹⁹ Fortna shows how the Ottoman state tried to create a conservative counter-model of the Muslim citizen in its public schools at the end of the century.²⁰ Attempts to restrict autocracy and foreign intervention were based on enhanced notions of dignity and political rights set out during the first parliament in Istanbul and Egypt during the Urabi Revolt in 1881–2, and in Tunisia in 1861.²¹ After the *Règlement* of 1861 in Lebanon, increasing self-rule led to the election of an almost fully autonomous local Council in 1907,²² while in Morocco the Hafiziyya led to the ulema demanding that the new sultan fulfill a list of conditions before they were willing to give their *bay'a* (pledge of allegiance) in 1908.²³

In all of these cases, notions of rights and the urgent need to limit the power of the autocrat led to new relations between subject/citizen and state. Rather than discerning the emergence of nationalism in these events, early notions of citizenship, belonging, and defense of rights are more apparent. That the Tanzimat did not produce the desired result of equal citizenship has many political (weak state capacity), cultural (linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity), and economic reasons (imperialist intervention). But as Campos and others have shown, despite these setbacks, Ottomanism was still a viable option in the Arab world during the Young Turk Revolution of 1908.²⁴

¹⁷ Sharkey, *Muslims, Christians and Jews*, 115–78.

¹⁸ F. Robert Hunter, *Egypt under the Khedives, 1805–1879: From Household Government to Modern Bureaucracy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984).

¹⁹ Although Albert Hourani's famous text does not ponder citizenship, it does contain many leads that can be pursued. See his *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983 2nd ed.).

²⁰ Benjamin C. Fortna, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²¹ Kenneth J. Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 26–8.

²² Engin Deniz Akarli, *The Long Peace: Ottoman Lebanon, 1861–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

²³ C. R. Pennel, *Morocco since 1830: A History* (New York: New York University Press), 137–9.

²⁴ Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

THE EXCLUSIVE COLONIAL AND INCLUSIVE ARAB SOCIALIST SOCIAL CONTRACT

While independent Turkey would divulge itself of the restrictions of the imperialist era, brutally homogenize Anatolia, and launch its Turkish nationalist citizenship project, the Arab world took another 30 years to enter this phase. It is generally agreed that the foundations of the colonial pact with large landowners, notables, minorities, and local monarchies against the rise of nationalist movements throughout the region was an attempt to deepen religious, economic, and social cleavages.²⁵ Colonial citizenship was based on a limited, segmented, sectarian, and privileged citizenship regime via incorporation of the local elite. In the long run it undermined the development of political, economic, cultural, and religious institutions conducive to universal and equal citizenship. The obvious examples are the creation of Lebanon around the Maronites, the promotion of Druze and Alewite statelets in Syria under the French mandate, the creation of a landed parasitic class in Iraq, the consolidation of large landownership in Egypt, and the building up of a Bedouin army in Jordan and a Berber army in Morocco. In settler colonies such as Algeria and Palestine, discrimination became ingrained. In Algeria a formal division was created between ‘natives’ (*indigènes*) ruled by the native laws, the *Code indigénat*, and settlers, *colons*, or *pieds noirs*, who as French citizens enjoyed the same full political, economic, and social rights as Frenchmen in France.²⁶ In Palestine, Jewish settlers through Zionist organization had better and direct access to British mandate rule than Palestinians.²⁷ Education, the most important way to create citizens at the time, almost everywhere suffered because of lack of funds. Throughout the mandate period, British and French colonial authorities blocked or undermined political institutions that could have led to the expansion of democratic inclusion.²⁸

Not until the 1930s and 1940s, in line with the development of global capitalism and the process of decolonization, did the Middle East start to develop equal and inclusive citizenship in opposition to the colonial pact as well as the indigenous intermediaries. This phase is closely connected to the coming of the *effendiyya*, the middle classes, into its own—its origins lay in the nineteenth century.²⁹ The major difference with the period before the First World War was that in this period the indigenous state had become much more powerful, and in countries that had become formally independent (Egypt in 1922, Iraq in 1932) the state came to be regarded as an instrument of social engineering that could be used for the benefit of the people.³⁰ Concepts such as the “common good” became the norm. Techniques such as planning (*takhtit*

²⁵ Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (California: University of California Press, 2000).

²⁶ John Ruedy, *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

²⁷ Laura Robson, *Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

²⁸ Elizabeth F. Thompson, *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Arab Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of its Historic Liberal-Islamic Alliance* (London: Grove Press, 2020).

²⁹ Lucie Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National Colonial Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³⁰ Roel Meijer, “Citizenship and the Transition from Colonial to Authoritarian Pacts,” in *Routledge Handbook of Citizenship of the Middle East and North Africa*, 85–100.

and *tawjih*) were regarded as a panacea for the elevation of poverty and integrating the peasantry and workers into the nation.³¹ The other major social change was the rise of the working class.³² Whereas the first wave of nationalism of the 1920s had been led by large landowners or followers of traditional power holders' views on creating the ideal Arab (Muslim) citizen over the long run through education, or in the Maghreb through integration as equal citizens with French citizens (especially Algeria), the second nationalist wave led by the effendiyya promoted social reform and revolution. This was a transformative nationalism that entailed a new concept and practice of the citizen. Moreover, its demands for inclusive citizenship were shored up by mass social action, strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins—and, in the end, guerrilla (Egypt along the Suez Canal, Tunisia, and Morocco) or, in the case of Algeria, full-fledged civil war, introducing a tradition of contestation, uprisings, and violence.

The academic focus in relation to this period has been on the rise of modern ideologies, Arab nationalism, pan-Arabism, and Islamism (the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928).³³ However, it is as rewarding to look at this period as a new phase in the development of citizenship. In that light, the Muslim Brotherhood's slogan "Islam is religion and state" (*al-islam din wa-dawla*), often regarded as a return to a pristine Islam, is an ideological move of the Brotherhood to capture the modern bureaucratic state to impose its own specific ideal of the Muslim citizen. Hasan al-Banna's tracts show that his project was primarily a moral project that required a state for its implementation as it had no clear idea how the state worked, let alone how individual rights could be protected.³⁴ Likewise, the claim that Islam is a "comprehensive system" (*nizam kamil*) is a strategic move to present an alternative societal model, including an "Islamic" economy, science, and education based on modernized ethical standards of Islam adapted to the attitudes commensurate with the ideal of the pious effendi citizen.³⁵ As Khalil Al-Anani and Hazem Kandil have pointed out, the technique used to achieve this ideal was internal indoctrination (*tarbiyya*) and socialization in an endeavor to establish a moral order.³⁶ Islamization is the Islamist "citizenization" of society. The central Brotherhood organization, the Tanzim, was more than a membership club; it was the embodiment of a citizenship project to homogenize conduct and thought. Ideologically, the Brotherhood could envision the citizen only as a pious citizen subsumed under a highly disciplinary and restricting shari'a. Likewise, the highly hierarchical, disciplinary, and secretive Syrian Nationalist Socialist Party (SSNP), founded in 1932 and under the leadership of the Greek Orthodox Antun Sa'ada, tried to create a secular state in the Levant and Cyprus that would make Muslims and Christians equal

³¹ Roel Meijer, *The Quest for Modernity: Secular Liberal and Left-Wing Political Thought in Egypt, 1945–1958* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).

³² Zachary Lockman (ed), *Workers and Working Class in the Middle East: Struggles, Histories, Historiographies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

³³ James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (eds), *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

³⁴ Hasan al-Banna: *Five Tracts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978. Translated by Charles Wendell). See especially "Between Yesterday and Today," 13–39.

³⁵ See especially how this is incompatible with the ethical system of Islamic law: Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

³⁶ Hazem Kandil, *Inside the Brotherhood* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015); Khalil Al-Anani, *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

citizens.³⁷ In all the nationalist and Islamist movements of the period, the ideologies were weak, their conceptualization of citizenship strong. In many organizations nationalism was completely subordinated to reform.³⁸

Yet, even if in Egypt the contours of a parallel society emerged against the backdrop of a secular nationalist state, Islamism was nowhere dominant, and cross-ideological trends to create an inclusive citizenship were still shared by secularists and the second-generation Islamists. As in Europe with the rise of the welfare state, combating the evil of “poverty, disease, and ignorance” was reflected in Egypt in Sayyid Qutb’s *Social Justice in Islam* in 1949,³⁹ in Syria in Mustafa al-Siba’i’s idea of mutual help,⁴⁰ in Iraq in Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr’s *Our Philosophy* (1959) and *Our Economy* (1961), and in Morocco in the reform program of the precursor of the Istiqlal, which included a complete reform of society from municipal councils, recognition of trade unions, general and free education.⁴¹ The same ideas were found in Iraq, for example in the *Ahali* group,⁴² or in the highly reformist programs of the communist parties in these countries. What is also often missed is that democratic change was one of the issues of the transformative citizen program. In Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, and even Algeria, the Ba’ath, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and the Algerian *Parti du peuple algérien* (PPA) took part in elections in the 1940s and 1950s and tried to win them. All nationalist and Islamist movements of the 1950s demanded political rights as part of the new post-colonial and post-“feudal” modern citizenship.

The result, however, was not some form of a commonly shared democratic citizenship based on an agreement of the identity of the country with rights and duties that were religiously neutralist and ethnically inclusive. Three models emerged with a restricted social contract, each with other exclusionary social and ethnic and religious citizenship regimes. These would temporarily solve the issue of inclusion but in the long run did not provide a solution to the central theme of the Middle East how to create a viable society and effective political system. The sectarian compromise agreed upon in Lebanon with the National Pact of 1943 between the notable classes of the different sects would come at the expense of the underclass and a strong state. The conservative alliance between emerging indigenous capitalism/large landowners/tribes and the monarchies and conservative Islamic institutions occurred in Jordan, Morocco, the Gulf, and Saudi Arabia. These citizen regimes were based on monarchical patriarchal benevolence, patronage, clientelism, and communalistic, apolitical notions of subjecthood of deference. Here, citizenship depended on personal loyalty to the monarch through *bay’a*. From the 1970s the rentier economies would greatly enhance this trend and create a dependent and graded subjecthood. In the third option, the revolution from above, the multi-party system was banned, land reform was implemented, foreign assets nationalized, and the public sector

³⁷ Carl C. Yonker, *The Rise and Fall of Greater Syria: A Political History of the Syrian Socialist Party* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

³⁸ Meijer, *The Quest for Modernity*.

³⁹ William E. Shepard, *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism: A Translation and Critical Analysis of Social Justice in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

⁴⁰ Johannes Reissner, *Ideologie und Politik der Muslimbrüder Syriens: Von den Wahlen 1947 bis zum Verbot unter Adib ash-Shishakli 1952* (Freiburg: Kalus Schwarz, 1980).

⁴¹ Susan Gilson Miller, *A History of Morocco* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 132–4.

⁴² M.A. Amin, *Jama‘at Al-Ahali: Its Origin, Ideology and Role in Iraqi Politics, 1932–1946* (PhD Durham University, 1980).

expanded to create jobs for the rising middle classes.⁴³ In the corporatist republics citizenship was in theory expanded to all the “productive forces,” but in practice it was limited to the public sector workers and bureaucracy. Under Saddam Hussein citizenship was restricted to members of the Ba‘ath.⁴⁴ While in theory in the last model all citizens had equal rights, in practice having the right connections, *wasta*, was crucial to acquire state services.

The unraveling of the inclusive Arab socialist social contract occurred in the 1980s with the next wave of globalization and capitalist expansion. For the Middle East the result was disastrous. The result is fragmented, socially and economically divided, religiously sectarianized, and ethnically exclusive multiple graded citizenship regimes that threaten the coherence of Arab society. Indeed, because none of the multiple historical issues of citizenship were solved, they accumulated, exacerbating their negative effects. On the one hand, the rich created their own segregated citizenship regimes by working in international companies, living in gated communities, sending their children to private schools and universities, and holidaying in special resorts; on the other hand, a greatly impoverished middle class, a privatized working class, and a new, rapidly expanding underclass of self-employed working in the informal sector and living in informal housing projects became dependent on downgraded state services. Food and energy subsidies are the last remnants of the formerly inclusive social contract. As a result, citizenship and the sense of belonging and entitlements are flowing away from the center to different sections of the state: the rich and their dependants.

Three new models have arisen. The first consists of partial or sectorial “social contracts” between sections of the state itself.⁴⁵ For instance, in Egypt, the military have what Yezid Sayigh calls a “loyalty allowance”⁴⁶ and the Coptic church what Paul Rowe calls a “neo-millet partnership” with the state.⁴⁷ The list of separate deals with special interests such as businessmen and public sector workers is long. In the second, the state has been taken over. In the past Lebanon had been an exception; over the past two decades sectarianized states have been created in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In Iraq the state has been colonized by Shi‘i organizations and militias that have divided among themselves ministries, municipal councils, intelligence services, and the army. Here membership of militias and political parties gives access to citizen benefits and identification. The only place where the original social contract still exists is in the oil-rich Gulf states—the third model—where an extremely limited number of citizens enjoy economic and social privileges. In all cases, cronyism, corruption, and social and economic exclusion have become prevalent and new surveillance methods have been introduced to keep large sections of the disenfranchised “non-citizens” living beneath the poverty line (40 to 60 percent of those in most Arab countries), to which also the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees belong, under control.

⁴³ Relli Shechter, *The Rise of the Egyptian Middle Classes: Socio-Economic Mobility and Public Discontent from Nasser to Sadat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁴⁴ Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam’s Hussein’s Ba‘th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Robert Springborg, *Egypt* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

⁴⁶ Yezid Sayigh, *Above the State: The Officers’ Republic in Egypt*. Carnegie Papers, August 2012.

⁴⁷ Paul S. Rowe, “The Church and the Street: Copts and Interest Representation from Mubarak to Sisi,” *Religion, State and Society* 48 (2020) 5: 343–60.

EXCLUSIVE CITIZENSHIP PROJECTS

Since the 1980s two main alternative citizenship projects have emerged. By far the most important is the Islamist movement. In contrast to liberalism—with its “thin” theory of minimal citizenship based on individual freedom, which in the Middle East is often elitist—Islamism’s strong or “thick” concept of citizenship combines a legitimacy that is sanctioned by divine laws and practices and a terminology that claims authenticity and provides for a moral order. Besides its promise of salvation, the Islamist movement goes far beyond normal social movements, civil society associations, or political parties in constituting a parallel society. The Muslim Brotherhood is the model for both Sunni as well as Shi’i Islamist movements. Becoming a member resembles a conversion. Many are born into the movement. Like in a state, members receive spiritual guidance, religious instruction, modern education, and health care in Brotherhood clinics, but also job opportunities in associated companies. Socialization into the movement extends, as in the heyday of the communist parties, to friendship, leisure, and cultural activities. Marriages mostly take place within the organization. The movement is hierarchically organized, with a strong leadership and executive council and a system of graded membership, and careers within it are made by climbing up the hierarchy and gaining wider privileges. Tremendous pressure and sanctions are applied if members do not abide by the rules and if they prove themselves to be disloyal and disobedient, in line with the rule to “hear and obey” (*sam‘ wa-l-ta’a*). In this light, the pledge of loyalty (*bay’a*) of its members to the leader resembles a social contract of absolute loyalty. And like in a state, where citizenship is not a free choice, it is not easy to leave the Brotherhood. The common good coincides with the interests and the preservation of the organization, the *Tanzim*, which is the focus commitment (*iltizam*) of the members. As a result, cross-ideological alliances are provisional and temporary, elections are means of integration into the political system, and entry into the government has the aim of claiming public resources for the organization. These qualities have made Islamism the ideal replacement for the state when it retreats from its basic task to provide services to the people.

The extent to which Islamism was able to expand to its full potential depended on political circumstances. In the past, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was able to develop rapidly under the weak monarchy (1923–52), to the extent that it established its own armed battalions, but it floundered when it challenged the military after 1952, only to reestablish itself under Sadat and Mubarak by benefiting from the economic and political opening (*infitah*) that allowed it to thrive economically and participate in the parliamentary system in the 1980s. Hemmed in by the state under Mubarak, which clamped down on the *Tanzim* every time it became too powerful, it was transformed, as it were, into another parastate that was tolerated as long as it recognized the legitimacy of the state. For the same reason it was prevented from forming a political party, although, true to the form of political participation, internally there always existed a strong counter-current that rejected political participation as “partisanship” (*hizbiyya*) because it led to division. By the time of the Arab Spring it had become so focused on self-preservation that it was unable to overcome its isolation, build cross-ideological alliances, and make the jump to speaking credibly in name of all Egypt’s citizens in the elections of 2011–12. Nor was the military willing to allow it to show its competence in governing Egypt under Morsi’s presidency. Its clampdown in July 2013 ended for the foreseeable future any prospect for the Brotherhood to break out of its confines and develop a more modernist, inclusive notion of equal citizenship.

The kind of citizen regime Islamism adopts when it takes over the state can be seen in Sudan, where, after the military coup in 1989, the National Islamic Front (NIF) implemented a program of “empowerment” (*tamkin*), purging its opponents, taking over the state, and inculcating an “Islamic” shari‘a regime supported by the moral police.⁴⁸ This was not inevitable. The Egyptian Wasat Party adopted the older notion of Islamic civilization that recognized non-Muslims as equal citizens and regarded the people as the source of power, embracing a civil state (*al-dawla al-madaniyya*) instead of a religious state (*al-dawla al-diniyya*).⁴⁹ The Tunisian Nahda party would take this program several steps further in 2016 when it severed its relations with the movement and became a party for all Tunisian citizens.⁵⁰

More successful than the Brotherhood or the NIF in implementing the Islamist program of creating a captive citizenship is Hezbollah. The Lebanese sectarian system proved to be the ideal environment for developing state-like institutions which created a membership that was transformed into almost full citizenship. The only authority Hezbollah did not acquire was to issue passports. Like the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1930s, it was an emancipatory movement based on the economic, social, psychological, and religious uplifting and mobilization of the impoverished and exploited Lebanese Shi‘is. But it could claim more credibly than the Brotherhood to present a “comprehensive, complete and appropriate program for a better life,”⁵¹ as Hezbollah indeed was able to cover all aspects of life of its members, both ideologically and practically. As religion and politics were even more unified according to the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* than in Sunni Islamism, membership of Hezbollah meant entering a closed ideological and material world. While members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood were still drafted into the army, paid taxes to the Egyptian state, deferred to the judiciary and the police, and often followed a public school education, many of these state functions were taken over by Hezbollah itself. It introduced its own court system under the Higher Shi‘a Council for personal statute, ran its own charities and social affairs;⁵² governed its own neighborhoods, which became more exclusively Shi‘i, and named its streets and squares;⁵³ determined the content of its curriculum in Hezbollah-run secondary schools, seminaries, and mosque education; and flew its own flag and organized its own police to oversee compliance with strict dress codes, values, and norms.⁵⁴ Its media provided for the necessary ideological support, instilling in followers Hezbollah’s specific world view and political and religious outlook. Through funds provided by Iran and Syria as well as the Lebanese state, it was not only able to maintain a whole infrastructure, but guaranteed electricity during outages, collected garbage, and repaired sewage and water pipes.⁵⁵ For the poor it delivered subsidies for

⁴⁸ Mai Hassan and Ahmed Kodouda, “Sudan’s Uprising: The Fall of a Dictator,” *Journal of Democracy* 30 (2019) 4: 100.

⁴⁹ Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, “The Path to Moderation: Strategy and Learning in the Formation of Egypt’s Wasat Party,” *Comparative Politics* 36 (2004) 2: 205–28.

⁵⁰ Rory McCarthy, *Inside Tunisia’s Al-Nahda: Between Politics and Preaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁵¹ Joseph Daher, *Hezbollah: The Economy of Lebanon’s Party of God* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 30.

⁵² Adham Saouli, *Hezbollah: Socialization and its Tragic Ironies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 18.

⁵³ Saouli, *Hezbollah*, 94.

⁵⁴ Saouli, *Hezbollah*, 33, 47.

⁵⁵ Daher, *Hezbollah*, 33; Saouli, *Hezbollah*, 93–4.

education, food, and welfare, and as a state it paid regular wages and pensions, and developed its own martyrdom culture, including a provision for widows and children. Taking advantage of the liberal economy, Hezbollah developed contact with Shi'a bourgeoisie and contracted their construction companies to rebuild neighborhoods.⁵⁶ As the ultimate sign of sovereignty, it maintains its own militia, which, during the Syrian civil war, transmorphed into a regular standing army, and pursues its own foreign policy, entering into close relations with Syria and Iran and enjoying their protection against the Lebanese state. That the building of its own citizen regime had priority is clear from the fact that it took a decade for Hezbollah to become politically integrated.⁵⁷ The Sunni equivalent of Hezbollah, which developed in a sectarianized setting in Iraq, is ISIS. Through the distribution of "city documents" ISIS entered into a social contract with the local population.⁵⁸ In the end, its citizenization program was undermined by its counter-productive internationalist jihadist posturing.

A comparison with other militias that were less independent than Hezbollah or ISIS demonstrates that more equivocal citizenship projects also exist. A good example is Muqtada al-Sadr's movement in Iraq, the Mahdi Army. With deep roots in Iraqi history going back to his uncle Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr in the 1950s and his father Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who founded the movement in the 1990s,⁵⁹ the Mahdi Army was, like Hezbollah, able to gain adherence in poor sections of society such as the sprawling Sadr City in Baghdad. But unlike Hezbollah, the movement had a strong Iraqi nationalist slant that prevented it from accepting *wilayat faqih*. In that respect it found an ally in Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who spoke up in support of an independent Iraqi Arab identity with a secular political system, in the realization that the alternative was sectarian subjecthood to Iran.⁶⁰ Too weak to commit himself to a nationalist-first policy completely, Muqtada al-Sadr's idea of citizenship at first supported the Iranian-induced sectarianism, instigating the religious cleansing of Sunnis in Baghdad in 2007–8. During the general elections of 2018, however, he supported a common platform with the Iraqi Communist Party, calling for equal rights and an inclusive Iraqi national identity, based on the religiously neutral concept of the "citizen state" (*dawlat al-muwatana*).⁶¹ Although he was aware that sectarianism and the sectarian quota system (*muhasasa*) blocked reform and good governance, he nevertheless left the uprising of October 2019 in the lurch when the opportunity arose to take leadership over the Shi'i militias after the assassination of Qasem Suleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020.

If Muqtada al-Sadr played a highly ambivalent role in promoting a stable citizenship regime, the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Sha'bi) have actively undermined any solution to creating a stable citizenship regime by stoking sectarian strife in the struggle against ISIS. As of 2019 they were believed to number 130,000 members, divided across 45 different

⁵⁶ Daher, *Hezbollah*, 79–91.

⁵⁷ Daher, *Hezbollah*, 128–52.

⁵⁸ Mathilde Becker Aarseth, "The Islamic State's Construction of Citizenship," in *Routledge Handbook of Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Roel Meijer et al. (London: Routledge, 2021), 171–84.

⁵⁹ Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

⁶⁰ Benedict Robin D'Acrúz and Renad Mansour, *Making Sense of the Sadrists: Fragmentation and Unstable Politics*. Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 2020, 5.

⁶¹ Benedict Robin D'Acrúz, "Social Brokers and Leftist-Sadrism Cooperation in Iraq's Reform Protest Movement: Beyond Instrumental Action," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51 (2019): 257–80.

militias.⁶² Like Sadr's movement they have captured different sections of the economy, staking out control of oil fields, ministries, government contracts, and border crossings. This has become a common way of coping with the collapse of the state in the Middle East and North Africa, from the Janjaweed in Sudan to the Houthis in Yemen.

INCLUSIVE CITIZENSHIP

In protest against the colonization of the state by private interests and the complete destruction of inclusive notions of citizenship, new citizenship movements have emerged throughout the Middle East and North Africa, promoting the idea of common rights through the slogan "bread, freedom and social justice." Bayat has called these "refolutions," a combination of reform and revolution.⁶³ Their demands are directed at governments to end corruption, police brutality, mass pauperization and repression and do what they were meant to do: implement social justice; redistribute (oil) wealth; provide jobs, health care, social services and security.⁶⁴ The "dignity revolutions" are in fact citizen revolutions, supported by broad sections of the population and organized by different groups that try to find common ground. The source of these movements is a deep distrust of the state, whose leaders are often called "thieves"; of political parties, which have become part of the spoils system; and to a lesser extent of civil society, which is unable to effect change and defend the common interest. These movements gained force again after 2015, demonstrating a sense of shared citizenship that tries to overcome sectarian, segmented, dependent, and ethnic divisions and replaces a politics based on identity and communitarianism—which had become increasingly discredited—with a more universal concept of equal citizenship that cuts across ideological, religious, ethnic, political, and gender divides.⁶⁵ They promote a new sense of the general public and the "common good" and are located in neighborhoods, schools, markets, and workplaces. Often they are secular, not least because of the strong presence of women in the movements.

Another common trait is that they focus on concrete grievances related to the neglect of shared citizen rights, but along the way they progress to include wider demands related to citizen rights to life, freedom, organization, and political participation: the You Stink and Madiniti (My City) movements in Beirut, for example, protested the neglect of garbage collection, dilapidated public transport, and lack of affordable housing as signs of the mismanagement and corruption of municipal governance.⁶⁶ In 2019 massive demonstrations flared up as a result of electricity cuts but ended up protesting the sectarian political system in Lebanon as a whole. In Iraq the protest movement in the south was sparked in the summer of 2009 by a lack of potable water. The protests reoccurred every summer and moved in 2015

⁶² Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabr, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*, Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2017.

⁶³ Asef Bayat, "Revolution in Bad Times," *New Left Review* 80 (March/April 2013), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii80/articles/asef-bayat-revolution-in-bad-times>.

⁶⁴ Zmkan Ali Saleem and J. Mac Skelton, *Mosul and Basra after the Protests*. IRIS Working Paper, October 2019.

⁶⁵ See for instance Maha Yahya, *The Summer of Our Discontent: Sects and Citizens in Lebanon and Iraq*. Carnegie Middle East Center, June 2017; Sean L. Yom, "Tribal Politics in Contemporary Jordan: The Case of the Hirak Movement," *Middle East Journal* 68 (2014) 2: 231.

⁶⁶ Yahya, *The Summer of Our Discontent*, 17.

to Baghdad, where marches were held every Friday for five months in a row. Demonstrations and blockades against unemployment in the oil-rich province of Basra erupted in 2018.⁶⁷ The politicized Intifada of Tahrir Square in Baghdad of winter 2019–20 attacked the sectarianized *muhasasa* (apportionment according to religious affiliation) political system, demanding its reform. In the Moroccan Rif demonstrations broke out in 2016–17 in what became the HIRAK al-Rif movement, demanding such concrete measures as the building of a hospital and a university and improvement of infrastructure in order to alleviate unemployment. The movement gained wider support in the country because the demands were recognizable as a general critique of the state.⁶⁸ In Algeria mass demonstrations took place from February to December 2019 against the re-election of President Bouteflika for the fifth time; they continued after he withdrew his candidature in April, with the demonstrators demanding far-reaching democratic reforms. Finally, the uprisings against Sudanese President Bashir in Sudan, who had ruled the country since 1989, started in December 2018 and succeeded in their immediate goal with his downfall in April a year later, but continued nevertheless because the protesters demanded an overhaul of the government and the militias supporting it.

The repertoires of contention of these movements, which consisted of peaceful marches, rallies, strikes, sit-ins, pot-banging, surprise demonstrations, and other creative methods of showing dissatisfaction and solidarity have by now become well known. If violence did break out, it was mostly directed against offices of political parties and governmental institutions. Often reference to earlier historical models movements was made: the establishment of the 1921–6 Rif “Republic” in Morocco; the Iraqi revolt against the British in 1920 and the Intifadas of 1947 and 1956, when social and nationalist rights were united; Algerian demonstrators carrying pictures of heroes of the war of liberation against France in the name of equal citizenship. Typical of the Moroccan HIRAK movement is that it believed that the question asked by Abdelkrim El-Khatabi, the hero of the Rif uprising in the 1920s, of the new government in 1956 was still relevant: “Are you a government or a gang?”⁶⁹ That participants of these movements regarded themselves as citizens with inherent rights is also apparent from remarks they made. For instance, in the case of Jordanian HIRAK movement a demonstrator demanded political rights “as a citizen [...] not pay-offs (*makarim*),” refusing royal dole-outs.⁷⁰ In Baghdad in 2015 participants regarded themselves as “ordinary citizens,” as opposed to the corrupt politicians and sectarian militias.⁷¹

Like the alternative Islamist citizenship projects, the protest movements had their own models of exemplary behavior and ideals of community. These were embodied in their peaceful marches and sit-ins; their self-discipline; their celebration of equality; the emphasis on deliberation, open debate, artistic creativity, individual freedom; and their sense of responsi-

⁶⁷ Zmkán Ali Saleem and J. Mac Skelton, *Basra's Protest Movement and Unemployment: Contesting Party Dominance of the Oil Sector*. IRIS Policy Report, June 2019.

⁶⁸ Anne Wolf, “Morocco’s HIRAK Movement and Legacies of Contention in the Rif,” *The Journal of North African Studies* (2018), DOI: 10.1080/13629387.2018.1538188; Mohammad Masbah, “A New Generation of Protests in Morocco? How HIRAK al-Rif Endures,” *Policy Alternatives*, November 2017.

⁶⁹ Christoph H. Schwarz, “Transmediterranean Political Socialization: The HIRAK Movement, the Moroccan Diaspora and Europe as a Political Imaginary,” *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* 28–9 (2019): 103.

⁷⁰ Yom, “Tribal Politics,” 243.

⁷¹ Zahra Ali, “From Recognition to Redistribution: Protest Movements in Iraq in the Age of ‘New Civil Society’” (March 2021), 11. doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2021.1886794.

bility to the nation and the common good.⁷² Through their mutual trust in their co-demonstrators and their debates in public spaces they reconstituted the political community in what has been called the “re-enchantment of the political.”⁷³ During meetings, new social pacts were discussed and drawn up.⁷⁴ In such places as the *qiyada*, the square in front of the headquarters of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), where free food and health care was provided, artists performed and checkpoints were erected to keep people safe so that “young women and men could live out their claim to citizenship.”⁷⁵ This is not to deny the problems that have arisen due to the different ethnic, sectarian, or class backgrounds of the participants in the intifadas. In fact, class, ethnic, and religious diversity has at times meant it has been extremely difficult to build alliances and to maintain unity—for instance, in Khartoum between Arab middle classes in the center and African non-citizens in the periphery, or ethnic groups such as the Darfur.⁷⁶ Further, in Algeria, Amazigh have expressed feelings of exclusion. However, a new awareness exists that progress cannot be achieved without greater mobilizations of groups that before had been excluded, overcoming ideological, ethnic, religious, and class divides. The chant “*madaniyya, madaniyya*”—“civicness”—has many connotations, privileging civilians above the military and militias and peacefulness above violence, but also finding a common, shared citizenship.

Despite this new empowerment, the movements suffer from the same weaknesses seen during the Arab Spring. The state is always much more powerful, not only through its means of coercion but especially through its means of patronage, networks, and means of cooptation due to its vast resources. For those alliances that did hold, the basic challenge was to translate their ideas into political organizations and political parties and to stand in elections against political parties that are better embedded and have much larger resources. But by far the most important hurdle to overcome has been the preponderance of the Islamist movement, with its communitarian concept of citizenship. The other is the fundamental resistance of regional powers to potential democratization, whether these are conservative Sunni Gulf states or Iran, which wants to keep Iraq and Syria and Lebanon dependent on it.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that citizenship provides an alternative perspective to analyze the Middle East and North Africa. Once citizenship has come to be regarded as fundamental to the coherence of society, because it regulates relations between members of a political community and their relations with the state, the focus moves away from the detail of many of the disciplines that dominate the study of the Middle East and North Africa and is redi-

⁷² Islam Amine Derradji and Amel Gherbi, “Le Hirak Algérien: un laboratoire de citoyenneté,” *Metropolitiques.eu*. July 2019, www.researchgate.net/publication/334972316_Le_Hirak_algerien_un_laboratoire_de_citoyennete?msclkid=93a4cd03a60711ec95e972b9f82a3444.

⁷³ Derradji and Gherbi, “Le Hirak Algérien,” 10.

⁷⁴ Hassan Zerrouky, “Hirak: la difficile relève politique,” *Pouvoirs* 176 (2021) 81–92.

⁷⁵ Kevin Anderson, “Sudan’s Revolution of 2019: At the Crossroads of Africa and the Arab Worlds,” *New Politics* 17 (2020) 4: 18.

⁷⁶ Mohamed A.G. Bakhit, “Shanty Towns Identity versus Middle Class Identity: A Reading of the Historical and Geographical Dimension of December 2018–April 2019 Uprising,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 240 (2020): 919–41.

rected to these two topics and the concept that holds these topics together: the social contract. Ideally, the social contract is an agreement between citizens on the rights and duties they share which the state must execute. In Islam it is, of course, a covenant with God. However, as the state has become more powerful and global developments have occurred, the state has imposed a deal on its citizens, often absorbing their rights and offending their ideas of social justice. This trend is apparent in the four social contracts analyzed in this chapter. Whereas the Islamic social contract was largely based on Islamic law and its flexible interpretation by the ulama, with only limited interference of the in theory Islamic but in practice largely secular state, this is no longer tenable in the modern era, where state interference has grown and the secular sphere widened at the expense of the position of the ulama and Islamic law. The demand to implement equal citizenship in the nineteenth century, under the banner of Ottomanism, further enhanced the secularization of society until sultan Abdülhamid tried to create the ideal Muslim citizen through public schooling, in opposition to the growing power of the missionaries undermining loyalty to the empire among minorities. The brief colonial pact with local intermediaries did not lead to an alternative social pact as it was limited to the upper classes and minorities willing to work with colonial powers and uphold a graded, exclusive, dependent concept of citizenship. In the end it further divided the region socially, economically, religiously, and of course politically, by creating different artificial states with their specific citizenship regimes. The only social contract that could have made a difference was the broad inclusive social contract of the 1940s and 1950s that combined social reform, an inclusionary (however Arab) idea of the nation, and a transformative concept of the active citizen who would enjoy equal rights and gain access to the services of the state. Despite the ideological differences, for a brief period of time it seemed that the Islamist movement, liberals, and socialist movements could agree on such a common program. It failed, however, to be inclusive because the secularists in the republics captured the state and could implement the social dimension of the contract, excluding the Islamist movement. Nevertheless, this went relatively well until the republics ran into economic problems in the 1980s and were forced to take austerity measures and scale down their welfare programs. In the meantime the Islamist movement had developed its increasingly communitarian, exclusivist, and separatist religious community, the *jama'a*, creating a parallel society promoting its own citizenization program that appeared to be authentic but was thoroughly modern in its disciplining methods.

How successful such movements were depends on the political circumstances, but over time many of these programs have been discredited because these movements have become focused on taking over the state and exploiting its resources and doling them out to their adherents rather than implementing their ideal of the Muslim citizen. Corrupt, incompetent, exclusive, and repressive in Lebanon, Sudan, Iraq, and Syria, they have been challenged by new citizen initiatives and movements that have made themselves felt since 2011.

Although presented as surprising, when we regard the increasing impoverishment, unemployment, immiseration, differences between rich and poor, sectarianization and incompetence, partisanship of the state, and the cynical use of religion for political purposes, it is logical that these movements have converged on terms as *muwatana* and *madaniyya* which have become common coinage, drawing on a long tradition of protest since the nineteenth century demanding equal civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. The success of these movements depends on their ability to overcome their own differences, oppose the authoritarian regimes willing to do anything to block democratization and accountability,

and neutralize the communitarian movements and build internal, regional, and international alliances that support a viable social contract.

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3. Political Islam: a 40-year retrospective

Nader Hashemi

INTRODUCTION

In August 2021, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan. This was a global event that generated immense media coverage, rekindling interest in the theme of political Islam. Nine months earlier, France and Austria witnessed a series of terrorist attacks that led to an official ban on political Islam by both governments. These events roughly coincided with the 40th anniversary of the rise of political Islam on the global stage.¹

While this trend in Muslim politics has deeper historical and intellectual roots, it was approximately four decades ago that this subject emerged to influence the study of international relations and Middle East politics. Several events contributed to this development: the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Saudi militants, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the rise of the Afghan Mujahideen, Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization program in Pakistan, and the Muslim Brotherhood's growing prominence in societies throughout the Arab world.

Today, outside a small group of academic experts, political Islam remains poorly understood. In Western popular culture, in intellectual circles and among policy makers, the terms political Islam, Islamism, or Muslim Brotherhood have deep pejorative associations. Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 and the rise of ISIS have certainly influenced this perception. Regrettably, interpretative nuance, ideological distinctions, socio-economic conditions, and an appreciation for political context are rarely utilized in the analysis of political Islam.

This chapter has modest aims. It seeks to reflect on the broad theme of political Islam on its 40th anniversary, by critically examining two separate but interrelated controversies. The first theme is political Islam's acquisition of state power. Specifically, how have the various experiments of Islamism in power affected the movement's popularity, prestige, and future trajectory? Second, the theme of political Islam and violence will be discussed. In this section, I interrogate the claim that mainstream political Islam acts as a "gateway drug" to radical extremism in the form of Al Qaeda or ISIS. This thesis has gained popularity in recent years. Does it have any validity?

¹ I am utilizing Andrew March's definition whereby "political Islam should be understood in the broadest sense possible as the range of modern political movements, ideological trends, and state-directed policies concerned with giving Islam an authoritative status in political life." See his field survey, "Political Islam: Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015): 103–23. My focus is on the mainstream expressions of political Islam in the Middle East and North Africa.

POLITICAL ISLAM IN POWER

Generalizations about political Islam are almost always misleading. Understanding the national context is essential for anyone seeking a firm grasp of the dynamics of religious politics in Muslim societies.² Nonetheless, there are some overarching truths that apply to this subject. First, political Islam emerged in response to the decline of Muslim civilization during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Second, political Islamists gradually developed a political theory for a just society premised on a critique of secular paradigms and anti-imperialism and anchored in an argument about Islamic authenticity. Third, for most of its history, political Islam was an opposition movement. Forty years ago, political Islam had no direct experience of control over state institutions. On this latter point much has changed, resulting in significant consequences for the future trajectory, appeal, and orientation of political Islam.

Looking back over the past 40 years, political Islam's experience with political power stands out as an important development. Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, Sudan, Turkey, Jordan, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Malaysia have all experienced religious-based political movements contesting or obtaining varying degrees of control of the state. Admittedly, these experiences are extremely complex and heterogeneous, and generalizations are hazardous to make. Some Islamist forces have come to power via revolution and military coup/conquest. Others have risen to power via the ballot box, often in semi-authoritarian settings.

One general theme, however, stands: the popular prestige of political Islam has been tarnished by its experience with state power. To those sympathetic to its narrative, the Islamist vision for a new political order was given the benefit of the doubt. Arguably, this has changed significantly since 1980. Due to the interaction and acquisition of state power by political Islamist movements, Islamism writ large has lost its pristine image, its perceived innocence, and some of its luster. This trend was confirmed by a major 2019 study by the Arab Barometer that noted a significant decline in support for religious parties and leaders.³

Political Islam's waning appeal is most apparent in Iran. Four decades of Islamist rule has produced the opposite—societal secularization on a wide scale, especially among young people, in urban areas, and among the middle class. Iranian opposition politics is also decidedly secular in the sense that democratization in Iran now is intimately linked with anti-clericalism and the demand to separate religion from state.⁴ As the dissident scholar and theologian

² See, for example, Mohammed Ayoob and Danielle Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in Muslim Societies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 1991); L. Carl Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); James Piscatori and Dale Eickelman, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); John Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); Joel Beinin and Joe Stork, eds, *Political Islam: Essays From Middle East Report* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Political Ideas & Movements in the Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1993); François Burgat, *Understanding Political Islam* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021); and Shahram Akbarzadeh, ed, *Routledge Handbook of Political Islam* (London, Routledge, 2021).

³ "Arabs Are Losing Faith in Religious Parties and Leaders," *The Economist*, December 5, 2019, www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/12/05/arabs-are-losing-faith-in-religious-parties-and-leaders.

⁴ Mir Hossein Mousavi, "The Green Movement Charter" in *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future*, ed. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (New York: Melville House, 2011), 332–44.

Mohsen Kadivar has argued, “the process of secularization hasn’t stopped, and there’s no way can we stop it.”⁵ He attributed this directly to the failure of political Islamist project in Iran.

Senior Iranian leaders have openly acknowledged this problem. On the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the influential hardline cleric Ayatullah Mesbah-Yazdi gave an interview where he acknowledged that “Iranians are evading religious teachings and turning to secularism.” He admitted that the Supreme Leader was aware of this trend. He also added that the problem was so pervasive that “we see traces of secularism even among the country’s top officials. This is the case even in the seminaries.”⁶

Thirty years of military rule in Sudan, backed by the forces of political Islam, produced similar results. What stands out about Sudan under the leadership of Omar al-Bashir is not only massive corruption, economic mismanagement, and authoritarian rule but also human rights violations on a massive scale. This has resulted in an indictment against Bashir for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in Darfur by the International Criminal Court. Global isolation and sanctions have followed, not to mention a devastating civil war in the south that led to the partition of the country.

A democratic uprising began in Sudan in December 2018. It succeeded in toppling Bashir’s dictatorship in April 2019. After months of sustained protest, a three-year transition to democracy was negotiated between the Transitional Military Council and the Forces for Freedom and Change, backed by the international community. The reputation of political Islam in Sudan was thoroughly tarnished by its association with the old order.

After the 1989 coup that brought Omar al-Bashir and the Islamists to power, the Sudanese philosopher and public intellectual Abdelwahab El-Affendi wrote the important book *Who Needs an Islamic State?* Forecasting the disaster that was to emerge, he predicted conflict, bloodshed, and a massive suppression of democratic and human rights under an Islamist vision for Sudan. He was specifically critical of the utopian idealism and apocalyptic fervor of Islamists who claimed they understood God’s will and were intent on imposing it on society. Instead of focusing on political power, El-Affendi argued that Muslim activists should concentrate their efforts on promoting ethically grounded Islamic values and virtues.⁷ Looking back, he observes that “for most Sudanese, Islamism came to signify corruption, hypocrisy, cruelty

⁵ Julie Poushin Harbin, “Kadivar: Secularization of the Islamic Republic of Iran Unstoppable,” *Duke Today*, April 18, 2012, <https://today.duke.edu/2012/04/kadivartalk>. See also Nader Hashemi, “Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* and the Secularization from Below in Iran,” in *A Secular Age Beyond the West*, ed. Mirjam Künkler, John Madeley, and Shylashri Shankar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 185–210; and Pooyan Tamimi Arab and Ammar Maleki, “Iran’s Secular Shift: New Survey Reveals Huge Changes in Religious Beliefs,” *The Conversation*, September 10, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/irans-secular-shift-new-survey-reveals-huge-changes-in-religious-beliefs-145253>. See also Mahmoud Pargoo and Shahram Akbarzadeh, *Presidential Elections in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁶ This interview was originally given to the hardline weekly *9 Day*. For an English summary see “Regime Ideologue Says Iranians Evade Islam, Turn to Secularism,” *Radio Farda*, January 2, 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-islamic-ideologue-says-iranians-turning-to-secularism-mesbah/29688233.html>.

⁷ Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?* (London: Grey Seal, 1991). See also his chapter, “Hasan Turabi and the Limits of Islamic Reformism,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, ed. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 145–60.

and bad faith.” He describes the 2018–19 democratic uprising in Sudan as “the first genuinely anti-Islamist country in popular terms.”⁸

The other prominent example of political Islam in power is Afghanistan under the Taliban. Although the Taliban initially governed for only a short time, between 1996 and 2001, their record of political rule, marked by a strict interpretation and imposition of Islamic law, generated global outrage. They are remembered today for their persecution of women and religious minorities, for cultural destruction, and, most tellingly, for harboring Al Qaeda.⁹ Across the Muslim world, beyond their own ethnic Pashtun support base, they have few followers. Their return to power in 2021 after the defeat of the Western-backed Afghan government has not changed this fact. Internationally, Taliban rule is a metaphor for medieval barbarism.

By contrast, political Islamists who have come to power via the ballot enjoy greater legitimacy and popularity, though their appeal has arguably peaked and their ability to comfortably win future elections remains in doubt. Turkey stands out here as an important case study.

The Justice and Development Party (AK Party), under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has been in power for almost 20 years. From 2003 to 2013 it presided over an unprecedented period of liberalization and democratization marked by high voter turnout and sustained economic growth. During this period Turkey’s political and economic progress was widely hailed, and scholars considered it to be on the path to liberal democracy. At the onset of the Arab Spring, the AK Party was referred to as a model that religious-based parties in the Arab world sought to emulate.

The year 2013 was a critical turning point. After the protests in Istanbul’s Gezi Park, Erdoğan and his AK Party presided over the steady de-democratization of Turkey. While signs of this authoritarian turn were apparent much earlier, the Gezi Park crackdown was a harbinger of things to come. The failed military coup in 2016, blamed on the Gulen Movement, significantly enhanced the slide toward authoritarianism.¹⁰ Using the pretext of national security, hundreds of thousands were arrested and fired from their jobs. Today, Turkey has the distinction of being “the biggest jailer of journalists in the world,” according to Amnesty International.¹¹ Civil society has been restricted, opposition leaders have been jailed, and President Erdoğan is rightly compared with other right-wing populist leaders around the world.

Erdoğan and the AK Party still have significant support within Turkey. However, in light of a declining economy and the emergence of a new breakaway party headed by Ahmet Davutoglu (former prime minister and close Erdoğan ally), it is doubtful that the AK Party can win another national election. The mayoral election of 2019 in Istanbul, which the AK Party lost, is a sign of things to come.

Tunisia’s Islamists, who now prefer to be called Muslim democrats, have the most promising track record in terms of commitment to the values and practices of liberal democracy. They

⁸ Abdelwahab El-Affendi, “Sudan Protests: How Did We Get Here?” *Al Jazeera*, December 28, 2018, www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/12/28/sudan-protests-how-did-we-get-here.

⁹ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ M. Hakan Yavuz, *Erdoğan: The Making of an Autocrat* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021). For an excellent analysis of the slide toward authoritarianism under the AK Party see Jenny White, “Spindle Autocracy in the New Turkey,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 24 (2017): 23–37.

¹¹ “Turkey: Journalism Is Not a Crime,” *Amnesty International*, February 2017, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/02/free-turkey-media/. Also see Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2020* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2020), 573–80.

played a critical role in Tunisia's transition to democracy during the Arab Spring, and since the July 2021 seizure of power by President Kais Saied they remain a leading voice in demanding a restoration of democracy and full implementation of the constitution. Their electoral appeal, however, has diminished, as recent election results have revealed. This has less to do with their performance in power and more to do with the dire economic conditions facing Tunisia today. The extent to which the performance of the Ennahda Party under the leadership of Rached Ghannouchi remains a model and inspiration for other Islamist parties is debatable.¹²

In other parts of the Arab world, where relatively free and fair elections have taken place, the popularity of Islamist parties remains steady. Looking forward, the support enjoyed by these parties is unlikely to increase beyond current levels. Recent election results in Morocco (2016), Lebanon (2018), and Kuwait (2020) would seem to bear this out. The case of Iraq deserves special mention because it clearly confirms my overall argument on the declining appeal of political Islam based on its record in power.

Shia Islamist parties have dominated Iraqi politics since the removal of Saddam Hussein. Their rule has marginalized Iraq's Sunni Arab minority but has also increasingly alienated Iraqi Shia Muslims, particularly the urban poor and the sizeable youth population. This was on display in October 2019, when a national uprising broke out against the Iraqi government protesting dire economic conditions, a lack of access to safe drinking water, Iran's influence on Iraqi politics, and expanding corruption. The Iraqi prime minister resigned one month after the uprising began.¹³

Most Iraqi (Shia) Islamist parties have degenerated into large patronage networks. Their priority has been the use of state resources to enrich their own supporters. During the 2018 national election the Sairoon Alliance, composed of supporters of the populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and the Iraqi Communist Party, won the plurality of votes. This was repeated in the October 2021 elections. It is noteworthy that Muqtada al-Sadr campaigned on a platform of anti-corruption and providing public services. Sectarian identity politics had lost much appeal, although it was still a factor. To the extent that this is a harbinger of things to come, it does not bode well for Islamist parties in Iraq and throughout the region, as for most citizens economic issues and basic questions of survival take precedence over questions of identity and authenticity.¹⁴

Finally, there is ISIS. While our focus up to now has been on mainstream religious-based parties and movements, the rise of Islamic State, located at the extreme end of the political Islamist spectrum, has a bearing on how the world perceives political Islam.

The rise and fall of ISIS produced massive global media coverage. Much of this pertained to its extreme acts of violence, both in the Middle East and in major Western capitals. The term "Islamic State" is now tarnished because of its association with bloodshed and barbaric rule in the name of Islam. For a long time, mainstream political Islamists aspired to create

¹² For a very thoughtful and insightful commentary on this topic see Abdullah Al-Arian, "Arab Spring: The End of Political Islam as We Know It," *Middle East Eye*, December 25, 2020, www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/arab-spring-end-political-islam-as-we-know-it.

¹³ "Iraq: Water Crisis in Basra," *Human Rights Watch*, July 22, 2019, www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/22/iraq-water-crisis-basra. Also see Fanar Haddad, "Hip Hop, Poetry and Shia Iconography: How Tahrir Square Gave Birth to a New Iraq," *Middle East Eye*, December 9, 2019, www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iraq-new-political-awareness-and-culture-have-been-formed.

¹⁴ Jane Arraf, "Iraq, Struggling to Pay Debts and Salaries, Plunges into Economic Crisis," *New York Times*, January 4, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/01/04/world/middleeast/iraq-economy-debt-oil.html.

an Islamic state (*dawla al-Islamiyya*), albeit significantly different than the one presided over by Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS. This was the explicit aspirational goal of nearly all Islamist groups in the latter half of the twentieth century. After the rise of ISIS, the term “Islamic state” has come into disrepute. It is now associated on a global level with evil, bloodshed, and barbarity. The term “civil state” (*dawla madiniya*) has increased in popularity among mainstream Islamists and has gradually replaced an explicit demand for an “Islamic state.”

POLITICAL ISLAM AND TERRORISM

There is a structural and ideological bias that has long dominated the debate on political Islam and violence. Typically, when a non-state actor with a religious identity engages in violence against a pro-Western target, the charge of terrorism is levied, and condemnation soon follows. By contrast, when a pro-Western regime engages in an act of violence, often with greater lethality and against civilian noncombatants, the terrorism label is *not* used and the violence is ignored, excused, or sometimes explicitly justified.¹⁵

Consider the case of Henry Kissinger. In reviewing events in Egypt during the Arab Spring, he observes that after winning the presidential election in 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood

concentrated on institutionalizing its authority by looking the other way while its supporters mounted a campaign of intimidation and harassment of women, minorities and dissidents. The military’s decision [in 2013] to oust this government and declare a new start to the political process was, in the end, welcomed even among the now marginalized secular, democratic element.¹⁶

Overlooked in Kissinger’s narrative is the fact that the Egyptian military coup was accompanied by an unprecedented orgy of violence. Human Rights Watch described one particular event as a “likely crime against humanity” that may have been “the worst single-day killing of protesters in modern history.”¹⁷ This referenced the Rab’a al-adawiya massacre on August 14, 2013, where more than 1000 peaceful protesters were gunned down in the center of Cairo in the span of a few hours. This event is typically ignored in mainstream Western accounts, while the categorically different and smaller-scale abuses by Mohammed Morsi are listed in detail.¹⁸ It is widely accepted that state repression in Egypt today far exceeds the darkest days

¹⁵ The Israel–Palestine conflict is a perfect illustration of this point. For example, during the 2008–9 war between Israel and Hamas, human rights groups documented nearly 1400 Palestinian deaths, four-fifths of which were civilians including, 350 children. Israeli deaths were ten soldiers (four killed by friendly fire) and three civilians. The ratio of Palestinians to Israelis killed was more than 100:1 and the ratio of Palestinian civilians to Israeli civilians killed was 400:1. See Norman Finkelstein, *Gaza: An Inquest into Its Martyrdom* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 6–9.

¹⁶ Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 124.

¹⁷ “Egypt: Establish International Inquiry into Rab’a Massacre,” *Human Rights Watch*, August 14, 2015, www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/14/egypt-establish-international-inquiry-raba-massacre; and “Egypt: Rab’a Killings Likely Crimes against Humanity,” *Human Rights Watch*, August 12, 2014, www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/12/egypt-raba-killings-likely-crimes-against-humanity.

¹⁸ For a general account of these events see David Kirkpatrick, *Into the Hands of Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in the Egypt and the Middle East* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019). For a critique of the role of Egyptian liberals and secularists during and after the Arab Spring, see Daanish Faruqi and Dalia

of dictatorial rule under Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011). Notwithstanding this objective fact, in December 2020 France gave General El-Sisi its highest award, the Légion d'honneur (Legion of Honor). A month earlier, Germany awarded Egyptian Ambassador Badr Abdelatty the Federal Cross of Merit, its highest award.

In contrast to the regime that rules over them, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has officially rejected violence as a means of obtaining political power. Even its strongest critics grudgingly acknowledge this fact.¹⁹ Notwithstanding its rejection of violence and commitment to electoral politics, a narrative has emerged that argues that the Muslim Brotherhood still poses an ominous threat. Specifically, it is claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood acts as a “gateway drug” or “conveyor belt” toward radical fundamentalism in the form of Al Qaeda or ISIS.

The origins of this thesis are difficult to locate precisely.²⁰ In 2015 the Egyptian government commissioned the British law firm 9 Bedford Row to prepare a report on the history and structure of the Muslim Brotherhood. The “gateway-drug” thesis is explicitly referenced in this document: “The leaders of Islamic State [ISIS], Boko Haram and al-Shabaab were first members of the Muslim Brotherhood prior to any link with the al Qa’ida network,” the report states. “As a result, the Muslim Brotherhood has been described as a gateway of sorts to al-Qa’ida.”²¹ In a 2018 speech in London given to the right-wing British think tank Policy Exchange, UAE Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash repeated this claim: “The Brotherhood is an incubator—the gateway drug—to jihadism of all kinds.”²²

In the British law firm’s report, the source cited to substantiate the “gateway-drug” thesis is an article by Bill Roggio in *Long War Journal*.²³ Mr Roggio is a former American soldier with dubious credentials as a journalist. His contribution to this topic, which is footnoted as an authoritative reference, reads more like a blog post than a serious academic contribution. Moreover, the *Long War Journal* is a project of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies

Fahmy, eds, *Egypt and the Contradictions of Liberalism: Illiberal Intelligentsia and the Future of Egyptian Democracy* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2017).

¹⁹ Zachary Laub, “Background: Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 15, 2019, www.cfr.org/background/egypts-muslim-brotherhood.

²⁰ Abdelwahab El-Affendi traces its origins to Egyptian intelligence sources. In the late 1970s, Islamist militants were charged with “emerging from the cloak of the Muslim Brotherhood.” In the wake of 9/11, Saudi officialdom revived this claim to deflect attention away from the Wahhabi roots of the attackers. Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz, the interior minister at the time, frequently disseminated this charge. See Ahmed Al Jarallah, “Nayef Bin Abdulaziz: The Muslim Brotherhood Are the Cause of All Suffering,” *Al Seyassah* (Kuwait), November 23, 2002. Abdelwahab El-Affendi, personal correspondence with the author, December 24, 2020.

²¹ 9 Bedford Row, *The History of the Muslim Brotherhood: A Report by 9 Bedford Row* (London: 9 Bedford Row, 2015), 92. Available at: <http://9bri.com/9-bedford-row-report-on-the-history-of-the-muslim-brotherhood/>.

²² Patrick Wintour, “Donald Trump Hoping to Call Gulf States to Washington Summit,” *The Guardian*, July 27, 2018, www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/27/donald-trump-hoping-to-call-gulf-states-to-washington-summit. For background on the UAE and its obsession with the Muslim Brotherhood see Giorgio Cafiero, “The UAE Campaign Against Political Islam: Implication for London,” *Lobe Log*, December 27, 2018, <https://lobelog.com/the-uae-campaign-against-political-islam-implications-for-london/>.

²³ Bill Roggio, “Jordanian al Qaeda Operative Killed in US Airstrike in Pakistan,” *The Long War Journal*, January 12, 2010, www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/01/jordanian_al_qaeda_o.php.

(FDD)—a neoconservative American think tank, supportive of the policies of Donald Trump and funded by right-wing American supporters of Israel.²⁴

In May 2017 the FDD organized a special conference on “Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood’s Global Affiliates.” During closing remarks, John Hannah, a senior counselor at the FDD and national security advisor to former Vice-President Dick Cheney, observed:

One thing that has bothered me relates to a question that my colleague Mark Dubowitz [CEO of the FDD] asked Congressman [Ed] Royce. Mark said, “But what do we do about the ideological conveyor belt?” I’d note Bin Laden, Zawahiri, even Abu Bakar al Baghdadi, the Caliph of ISIS—all of them started where ideologically? As members of the Brotherhood. It’s no coincidence, I think, that the Muslim Brothers have been the gateway drug for a vast majority of violent Islamists the world over. So what do we do about that fact? Are we defenseless until they openly call for violence and start killing people? That just doesn’t sit particularly well with me.²⁵

Other think tanks such as the Hudson Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for Security Policy, and Quilliam have promoted the “gateway-drug” thesis as well.²⁶ In reading through their statements, a unifying theme emerges. The relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and radicalization is rarely argued. Rather, it is mostly forcefully asserted, without any social scientific research to back it up, when in fact most of the scholarship points in the opposite direction.²⁷

The “gateway-drug” thesis has also been advanced by various intellectuals. In *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, Bernard Lewis, writing after 9/11, argued that all Islamist groups were basically the same and did “not differ from the mainstream [of Muslims] on questions of theology and interpretation of scripture.”²⁸ In a later interview, Lewis categorically rejected the notion that the Muslim Brotherhood was “in any sense benign. I think it is a very dangerous, radical Islamic movement.” When pressed to elaborate, Lewis added:

²⁴ On FDD, see John Judis, “The Little Think Tank That Could,” *Slate*, August 18, 2015, www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2015/08/foundation_for_the_defense_of_democracies_inside_the_small_pro_israel_think.html.

²⁵ John Hannah, “Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood’s Global Affiliates: A New U.S. Administration Considers New Policies,” transcript of speech given at Washington, DC, May 23, 2017, https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/defenddemocracy/uploads/documents/Wald_Closing_Remarks.pdf. See also the congressional testimony of FDD Senior Vice-President, Jonathan Schanzer, “The Muslim Brotherhood’s Global Threat,” testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security on the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives, 150th Cong., 2d sess., July 11, 2018.

²⁶ On the Quilliam Foundation see David Shariatmadari, “Maajid Nawaaz: How a Former Islamist became David Cameron’s Anti-Extremism Adviser,” *The Guardian*, August 2, 2015, www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/aug/02/maajid-nawaz-how-a-former-islamist-became-david-camerons-anti-extremism-adviser. On the Hudson Institute see Hillel Fradkin, “The Muslim Brotherhood’s Global Threat,” testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security on the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives, 150th Cong., 2d sess., July 11, 2018.

²⁷ Lauren Powell, “Counter-Productive Counter-Terrorism: How Is the Dysfunctional Discourse of Prevent Failing to Restrain Radicalisation?” *Journal for Deradicalization* 8 (2016): 46–99; Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley, “Measuring Political Mobilization: The Distinction between Activism and Radicalism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21 (2009): 239–60.

²⁸ Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House, 2003), 24.

“I don’t know how one could get the impression that the Muslim Brotherhood is relatively benign unless you mean relatively as compared with the Nazi party.”²⁹

The leading proponent of the Muslim Brotherhood/Nazi comparison is the American liberal intellectual Paul Berman. Drawing on the work of historian Jeffrey Herf, he has written two widely reviewed books on this topic, *Terror and Liberalism* (2003) and *The Flight of the Intellectuals* (2010). Berman argues that the Muslim Brotherhood is an ideological derivative of European totalitarian movements that emerged in the early twentieth century, and that the threat it poses to liberal values is very similar. Berman was particularly critical of Western liberal intellectuals for not seeing this threat and actively opposing it. For him, this problem was embodied in the writings of Tariq Ramadan, a prominent European Muslim intellectual who is also the grandson of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan Al-Banna.

While acknowledging that Ramadan is not an extremist, Berman contends that his worldview acts like a “gateway drug” for young Muslims, leading them to harder theological intoxicants. For Berman, the real Muslim reformer and hero of our time is Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali-born Dutch–American feminist and public intellectual. She has argued that “we are at war with Islam. And there’s no middle ground in wars,” adding: “there comes a moment when you crush your enemy.” When asked if she was referring to radical Islam, Hirsi Ali replied, “No. Islam, period.” She has also suggested that Benjamin Netanyahu deserves the Nobel Peace Prize with specific reference to his policy on Gaza.³⁰ Michael Walzer, the prominent American political theorist and public intellectual, and Hussein Ibish, a Muslim liberal intellectual who works for a UAE-funded think tank, have both echoed Berman’s assertions.³¹

Many radical Islamists were indeed former members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The most influential figure that comes to mind is Sayyid Qutb. Comparing his earlier *Social Justice in Islam* (1949) to his later, incendiary book *Milestones* (1964), one can easily see the radical transformation and underlying political Islamist worldview that justifies the “gateway-drug” thesis. Many other prominent militant Islamists, such as Abdullah Azzam and Ayman Al-Zawahiri, have traveled down this same road. In a trenchant critique of this argument, however, Andrew March has observed that “gates open both ways.” He asks: why can’t the Muslim Brotherhood “not be a gateway from orthodox Islamism to something else?”³² Perhaps it could lead toward a more democratic and pluralist worldview, he suggests.

March draws our attention to the deep ideological and Orientalist bias that has shaped the debate on political Islam and violence. There is an inbuilt assumption that once a conservative,

²⁹ David Horowitz, “A Mass Expression of Outrage against Injustice,” *The Jerusalem Post*, February 25, 2011, www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/A-mass-expression-of-outrage-against-injustice.

³⁰ See Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003); and Paul Berman, *The Flight of Intellectuals: The Controversy over Islamism and the Press* (New York: Melville House, 2010). On Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Islam, see her interview with Rogier Van Bakel, “The Trouble Is the West,” *Reason* (November 2007), <https://reason.com/2007/10/10/the-trouble-is-the-west/>; See also Elias Isquith, “Ayaan Hirsi Ali: Bibi Netanyahu Deserves Nobel Peace Prize for Gaza Campaign,” *Salon*, August 4, 2014, www.salon.com/2014/08/04/ayan_hirsi_ali_bibi_netanyahu_deserves_nobel_peace_prize_for_gaza_campaign/.

³¹ Michael Walzer, “Islamism and the Left,” *Dissent* 62 (2015): 107–17; Hussein Ibish, “A Strategic US Approach is Required to Counter the Muslim Brotherhood,” *The National*, May 4, 2019, www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/a-strategic-us-approach-is-required-to-counter-the-muslim-brotherhood-1.857100.

³² Andrew March, “Who’s Afraid of Tariq Ramadan?” *The American Prospect*, May 2, 2010, <https://prospect.org/culture/afraid-tariq-ramadan/>.

illiberal Islamist, always a conservative, illiberal Islamist. If there is to be any ideological transformation, it is in one direction only: toward salafi-jihadism. This reductive approach presupposes that political Islamists live in a vacuum and their ideas are not affected by local political context, economic shifts, demographic fluctuations, generational change, the forces of globalization—and, critically, political learning, adaptation, and evolution.

The concept of post-Islamism is relevant here. Developed by Asef Bayat in 1996, it was initially based on a set of changes in post-revolutionary Iran at the level of society, not state. Similar developments were noticeable in other Muslim societies around the same time. The core idea of post-Islamism refers to a “metamorphosis of Islamism (in ideas, approaches, and practices) from within and without.”³³ According to Bayat, post-Islamism is a multi-dimensional movement within mainstream political Islam. It refers to a “political and social condition where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism are exhausted even among its once-ardent supporters.” Islamists gradually develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding about the problems, inadequacies, and complexities of their societies. They undertake a process of soul-searching and introspection related to state–society relations and the moral basis of legitimate political authority. “Islamism becomes compelled, both by its own internal contradictions and by societal pressure, to reinvent itself, but it does so at the cost of a qualitative shift.”³⁴

Does post-Islamism represent an ideological change toward secularism and an abandonment of religious politics? Bayat’s thesis is more nuanced, arguing that while there is a substantive ideological shift, it is not to be understood as an abandonment of religious politics but more as a reinterpretation of it. “Post-Islamism is neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic or secular,” he observes.

Rather, it represents an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty. It is an attempt to turn the underlying principles of Islamism on their head by emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past. It wants to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom (albeit at varying degrees), with democracy and modernity, to achieve what some have termed an ‘alternative modernity’.³⁵

Early examples of post-Islamist parties include the reform movement in Iran in the late 1990s, Indonesia’s Prosperous Justice Party, Malaysia’s People’s Justice Party, Egypt’s Center Party (*Hizb al-Wasat*), Morocco’s Justice and Development Party (PJD), and Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) prior to 2013, each of which emerged from mainstream Islamist currents, yet came to rethink the relationship between religion, state and society over time. The model of Christian Democratic parties in Europe most closely approximates this transformation.³⁶

³³ Asef Bayat, ed, *Post-Islamism: The Changing Face of Political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ Stathis Kalyvas and Kees van Kersbergen, “Christian Democracy,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 183–209.

A FIREWALL, NOT A GATEWAY DRUG

There is a longstanding and widely recognized inverse relationship between democratic societies and violence: the more that democracy advances, in the form of political accountability, public transparency, and the peaceful transfer of power, the less likelihood there is of violence. This idea draws upon a long intellectual tradition going back to the Enlightenment, where thinkers such as Kant, Rousseau, Paine, and de Tocqueville contributed to an argument that democratic societies are more internally peaceful and less likely to go to war than their non-democratic counterparts. This theory is pertinent to understanding the relationship between political Islam and violence.

Al Qaeda's response to the 2011 Arab Spring was revealing. It was stunned by these revolts, which produced ideological confusion and organizational incoherence. In an important study, *Jihadi Discourse in the Wake of the Arab Spring*,³⁷ the authors noted that during the Arab Spring, salafi-jihadi groups were both impotent and unpopular. During the Arab Spring it appeared that political change could be achieved via peaceful protest rather than by violent revolution. This undermined one of the central ideological claims of Al Qaeda, which has long argued that dictators could only be removed via armed struggle; democratic elections and nonviolent protests could never work. As Ayman Al-Zawahiri famously put it: "what is truly regrettable is the rallying of thousands of duped Muslim youth in voter queues before ballot boxes instead of lining them up to fight in the cause of Allah."³⁸ As a result, the ideological appeal of Islamist militancy during this period fell precipitously throughout the Arab-Islamic world.

The Arab Spring, however, was rolled back and ultimately defeated. A counter-revolution led by the previous ruling elites, acquiescence from the West, and, critically, strong support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates all contributed to this outcome.³⁹ The doors to peaceful political change and democratization were firmly slammed shut. This demonstrates another important relationship that is central to the politics of the Middle East: when democratic openings are closed and moderate forms of political Islam are crushed, radical Islam and violence consequently thrive. Egypt is a case in point.

In the 22-month period since Egypt's July 2013 military coup, there were more than 700 acts of violence across Egypt, compared to 90 attacks in the previous 22 months.⁴⁰ This lower figure overlapped with a democratization process put in place following Mubarak's ouster.

³⁷ Nelly Lahoud with Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, *Jihadi Discourse in the Wake of the Arab Spring* (West Point: Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, 2013).

³⁸ As cited by Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 (2005): 390–91.

³⁹ Michael Peel and Camilla Hall, "Saudi Arabia and Egypt Prop up Egypt Regime with Offer of \$8bn," *Financial Times*, July 9, 2013, www.ft.com/content/7e066bdc-e8a2-11e2-8e9e-00144feabdc0. See also Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy* (London: Hurst and Company, 2015), 177–83; Guido Steinberg, *Leading the Counter-Revolution: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring* (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2014).

⁴⁰ Robert Kagan and Michele Dunne, "Obama Embraces the Nixon Doctrine in Egypt," *Washington Post*, April 3, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obama-embraces-the-nixon-doctrine-in-egypt/2015/04/03/597b3be0-d986-11e4-ba28-f2a685dc7f89_story.html. Also see Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, *Egypt's Security Watch: Five Years of Egypt's War on Terror* (Washington, DC: Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2018), available at <https://timep.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/TIMEP-ESW-5yrReport-7.27.18.pdf>.

The huge spike in violence after the military coup is not a coincidence, either. Since then, and at the time of writing, Human Rights Watch has reported the arrests of approximately 60,000 political prisoners (mostly Muslim Brotherhood members), many of whom have been tortured. According to Amnesty International, Egypt is an “open air prison for critics,” and as 2020 came to a close “Egyptian authorities [...] embarked on a horrifying execution spree [...] putting scores of people to death, in some cases following grossly unfair mass trials.”⁴¹

Though the number of young people radicalized by these events is difficult to measure, anecdotal evidence, media reports, and social media trends suggest it is accurate to state that Egypt has become a breeding ground for radical Islamism. Marc Lynch has argued that, notwithstanding the Muslim Brotherhood’s social conservatism, it has acted as a “firewall” against extremism.⁴² The organization is able to “‘capture’ Islamists within a relatively moderate and peaceful movement and [this] prevents their evolution into more radical, violent actors.” When viewed from the perspective of politics on the ground in a deeply repressive state, Muslim Brotherhood members “are more likely to remain committed to the MB’s methods and doctrines, and to be more able to resist the temptations of the radical path to *jihad*.”⁴³

Since the 2013 coup and the attempt to eradicate the Muslim Brotherhood, this option no longer exists. There are only two options open to Egyptian youth today: (1) to remain silent and accept the current neo-fascist order, or (2) to contemplate joining a utopian revolutionary political project such as ISIS. There is no third alternative.⁴⁴ Tales from Egypt’s notorious prison system confirm this argument.

Mohammad Soltan, an Egyptian-American, was 25 years old when he was arrested in the summer of 2013. Soltan spent 16 of his 21 months in jail on hunger strike, losing 160 pounds, risking organ failure, and losing his ability to walk. In a special *New York Times* profile, he discussed the torture he faced and revealed details of the internal political debates among prisoners, several of whom were ISIS supporters.⁴⁵

“They walked around with a victorious air,” he recalled. They would frequently point to Muslim Brotherhood supporters and state: “look, you idiots, your model doesn’t work.” They would then “make very simple arguments telling us that the world doesn’t care about [democratic] values and only understands violence.” He noted that because “of the gravity of the situation [we] were all in, by the time the ISIS guys were finished speaking, everyone, the liberals, the Brotherhood people, would be left completely speechless. When you’re in that

⁴¹ “Egypt: Little Truth in Al-Sisi’s ‘60 Minutes’ Responses,” *Human Rights Watch*, January 7, 2019, www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/07/egypt-little-truth-al-sisis-60-minutes-responses; See also “Egypt: An Open-Air Prison for Critics,” *Amnesty International*, September 20, 2018, www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde12/9107/2018/en/ and “Egypt: Chilling Rise in Executions Reveal Depth of Human Rights Crisis,” *Amnesty International*, December 2, 2020, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/egypt-chilling-rise-in-executions-reveals-depth-of-human-rights-crisis/.

⁴² Marc Lynch, “Islam Divided between *Salafi-Jihad* and the *Ikhwan*,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33 (2010): 467–87.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 468 and 480.

⁴⁴ Borzou Daragahi, “The Arab Idealist Who Died for ISIS,” *Financial Times*, December 2, 2014, www.ft.com/content/97130d46-7952-11e4-9567-00144feabdc0; Emad Shahin, “Four Traits Sisi, Hitler and Mussolini Have in Common,” *Middle East Eye*, June 6, 2015, available at <http://emadshahin.com/?p=1916>.

⁴⁵ David Kirkpatrick, “U.S. Citizen, Once Held in Egypt’s Crackdown, Becomes Voice for Inmates,” *New York Times*, August 28, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/08/29/world/middleeast/us-citizen-once-held-in-egypts-crackdown-becomes-voice-for-inmates.html.

type of situation and don't have many options left, for some people these kinds of ideas start to make sense."⁴⁶

Tunisia, the one Arab Spring country that *did* undergo a successful democratic transition, provides an alternative model. Rached Ghannouchi, the leader of Ennahda, has observed that the "only way to truly defeat ISIS is to offer a better product to the millions of young Muslims in the world." It is called "Muslim democracy." He noted that most "young people don't like ISIS—see how many millions flee from it—but they won't accept life under tyrants either." This "better product" must be a democratic system that respects human rights and that gives Islamic values political space.⁴⁷

It is not a coincidence that ISIS emerged and attracted followers *after* the crushing of the Arab Spring in 2013, highlighting the relationship between democratization and violence. The simplest formulation of this insight was best articulated by John F. Kennedy in 1962 when he famously observed: "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable."⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

Approximately 40 years ago, political Islam burst onto the world stage. Seemingly, it has never since left. Different manifestations of this phenomenon have continued to generate mostly negative headlines. This chapter has sought to enhance analytical clarity by examining two separate but interrelated themes: the legacy of political Islam in power, and the relationship between political Islam and violence.

It was argued that, all things considered, the various experiments of political Islam's acquisition of state power have reflected negatively on this socio-political movement, especially in cases where Islamists came to power via revolution (Iran), a military coup (Sudan), or military conquest (Afghanistan). Islamism's acquisition of state power via the ballot box in Turkey and different parts of the Arab world has not substantially elevated the popularity of religious-based parties. Arguably, their appeal has peaked and Islamists will at best be able to retain their current level of support: it is unlikely to increase in the coming years. While the reasons for this are many, poor job performance is a critical factor in explaining this outcome.

Measuring the popularity of political Islam is difficult today. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, several Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and United Arab

⁴⁶ Samira Shackle, "Mohammad Soltan, the Egyptian Activist Who Spent 400 days on Hunger Strike in Prison," *The New Statesman*, October 28, 2015, www.newstatesman.com/world/middle-east/2015/10/mohamed-soltan-egyptian-activist-who-spent-400-days-hunger-strike-prison; Murtaza Hussain, "ISIS Recruitment Thrives in Brutal Prisons Run by U.S.-backed Egypt," *The Intercept*, November 24, 2015, <https://theintercept.com/2015/11/24/isis-recruitment-thrives-in-brutal-prisons-run-by-u-s-backed-egypt/>

⁴⁷ Fareed Zakaria, "From Tunisia, a Voice of Hope in the Muslim World," *Washington Post*, October 29, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-voice-of-hope-in-the-muslim-world/2015/10/29/a146f9da-7e60-11e5-b575-d8dcfedb4eal_story.html. See also Rached Ghannouchi, "Fight ISIS with Democracy," *The Atlantic*, February 1, 2016, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/02/tunisia-democracy-ennahda-isis/458703/.

⁴⁸ John F. Kennedy, "Address on the First Anniversary of the Alliance for Progress," transcript of speech delivered at Washington, DC, March 13, 1962, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-first-anniversary-the-alliance-for-progress.

Emirates) officially banned the Muslim Brotherhood. This state-sanctioned repression is among the worst the region has experienced since independence. According to Amnesty International, in 2019, “excluding China, 86% of all reported executions [in the world] took place in just four countries—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Egypt.” The Middle East is the most politically repressed part of the world, according to the 2020 Human Freedom Index.⁴⁹

The debate on political Islam and violence was also scrutinized in this chapter, especially concerning the question of whether the Muslim Brotherhood is a “gateway drug” toward radicalization or instead a firewall that restrains violent activity. The latter proposition was defended. It was argued that advocates of the Muslim Brotherhood gateway-drug thesis rarely cite empirical studies to substantiate their claim. Most proponents of this critique are politically motivated in the sense that their views on this subject are a consequence of their support for the ruling elites of various Arab states or due to their affinity with Israel, which is now openly allied with these authoritarian regimes. The Muslim Brotherhood is thus criticized not because it is a purveyor of violence, but fundamentally because it opposes the regional status quo and the political regimes that seek to maintain it.

In the introduction to the *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, the editors suggest the violence which some “Islamists proffer mirrors the very state-sanctioned violence against which they have struggled for almost a century.”⁵⁰ Many of the most prominent advocates of violent revolution in the Arab-Islamic world, from Sayyid Qutb to Abu Musab al-Zarkawi to Ayman Al-Zawahiri, are products of prison systems, having spent years in jail subject to unspeakable cruelty. It is unsurprising that people exposed to prolonged torture and extreme interrogation may conclude that violence is a legitimate political tool. According to the Palestinian Islamist Khaled Abu Hilal, “prison is my university”; this point was also eloquently made a hundred years ago by the Russian author and Marxist revolutionary Maxim Gorky:

A people brought up in a school that reminds one of the torments of hell on a small scale; a people accustomed to the clenched-fist, prison, and the whip, will not be blest with a tender heart. A people that the police agents have ridden over will be capable in their turn of walking over the bodies of others. In a country where unrest has reigned so long it is difficult for the people to realize from one day to the next the power of right. One cannot demand from a man who has never known justice that he should be just.⁵¹

This draws our attention to the structural conditions in the Arab-Islamic world that produce violence. This analytical approach is often ignored when the question of political Islam and violence is discussed. In this context, what is truly fascinating and in need of explanation is not the acts of violence produced by some non-state actors in the Middle East, but why this region has not produced *more* violence by these groups, given the existing repressive socio-political conditions. This framework of analysis for the question of political Islam and violence is rarely pursued. Doing so would enhance insight on the topic as well as contribute to overcoming

⁴⁹ Ian Vasquez and Fred McMahon, *The Human Freedom Index 2020* (Washington DC: The Cato Institute, 2020), 4; and “Death Penalty in 2019: Facts and Figure,” Amnesty International, April 21, 2020, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/death-penalty-in-2019-facts-and-figures/.

⁵⁰ Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 43.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

the persistent problem of bias that continues to undermine an objective understanding of this subject.

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4. The power of ideology in the Middle East and its limits

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INTRODUCTION

The Middle East is a region of high ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. At least four major ethnic groups—Arabs, Persians, Turks, and Kurds—inhabit the area. Three of the world's religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have their origins in this part of the globe and today these religious traditions, in their diverse denominations and many offshoots, continue to occupy the cities of their ancestors. In the modern era, these ethnic and religious communities have gravitated toward a wide spectrum of ideological worldviews, ranging from nationalism and socialism to liberalism and fundamentalism.

The intersection of identity and ideology has redefined communal memberships, solidarities, and enmities, and produced alternative visions of the sociopolitical order. In the most positive sense, ideology has inspired mass movements willing to advocate and sacrifice for their preferred ideal polities against colonial subjugation, imperial hegemony, and authoritarian elites. It has done so by uniting different religious communities toward a common purpose, as witnessed in the 1920 Iraqi revolt against the British,¹ and through forging cross-class cooperation against a dictatorship in the 1979 Iranian Revolution.²

Yet ideology can also have fissiparous tendencies, unleashing conflicts between adherents of competing visions of the ideal sociopolitical order. The three most common ideological divides in the Middle East have revolved around competing *territorial nationalisms*, the struggle between *secularism and fundamentalism*, and the activation of *religious sectarianism*.

Concerning nationalism, the most prominent conflict involves Arabs and Zionists fighting over a land they respectively call Palestine and Israel. Another important nationalist struggle pertains to Kurdish aspirations to build an independent state against the wishes of Arab, Turkish, and Iranian nationalists; all three have violently repressed Kurdish separatism. When it comes to religion and politics, the secularist/Islamist divide is equally prominent in Middle Eastern societies. Secularists insist on separating religion from politics and advance sociopolitical institutions rooted in modern ideologies of nationalism, liberalism, or socialism. Islamists, on the other hand, reject the separation of religion from politics and insist on the comprehensive nature of the Islamic tradition, arguing that it encompasses both matters of personal faith and public policy. The secularist/Islamist divide has been ongoing since at least the early part of the twentieth century, but accelerated with the success of the Iranian Revolution that ushered in a theocratic Islamic republic. The rise of a revolutionary elite in Iran and its

¹ Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Foundation of the Modern State* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

² Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 106–9.

Shi'i-inspired form of political Islam led to Arab opposition and hostility toward the Iranian state, unleashing sectarian identities in the process and contributing to heightened levels of Sunni–Shi'i violence in the region.

In this chapter, I argue that ideology is an important feature of Middle East politics. The power of ideology is its ability to articulate the complexity of national aspirations and collective grievances into simple narratives about ingroups and outgroups, alternative sociopolitical institutions, and territorial aspirations. Such ideological narratives inspire both loyalty and opposition to the state, facilitate collective action, and foster individual commitments to sacrifice for a cause.

However, ideology in Middle East politics has had its limits as well. Ideological actors confront two daunting challenges that they struggle to overcome, but are rarely able to. The first is *internal fragmentation*. Ideological movements do not constitute a single cohesive faction. On the contrary, often they are fragmented into rival groups. Factional splits have plagued both pan-Arab nationalists and pan-Islamists, enabling their state adversaries to easily undertake a divide-and-conquer strategy. The second challenge facing ideological movements is *external intervention*. The appeal of ideology is rarely sufficient to overcome the barriers imposed by external powers that intervene regularly in support of local elites. As I demonstrate in this chapter, both pan-Arab nationalists and pan-Islamists have had to contend with western states opposing their ideological visions and supporting their local rivals every step of the way. Consequently, both ideological movements ultimately failed to fundamentally remake the political map imposed and sustained by western powers.³

CONCEPTUALIZING IDEOLOGY IN THE POLITICS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

The concept of ideology has been criticized for its “conceptual anarchy”⁴ and “semantic promiscuity.”⁵ Yet, social scientists and historians return to the concept of ideology because the alternative—that ideas *do not* matter to political legitimacy and behavior—seems implausible. Although scholars may disagree on how best to define and operationalize ideology, they agree that ideology has both *substantive* and *functional* roles.⁶

Substantively, ideology refers to a set of political beliefs derived from worldly or metaphysical philosophies that are presumably universal, comprehensive, and ethical. Communism, for example, is an ideology rooted in the Marxist view of history as a perpetual class struggle between the exploited and the exploiters. It rejects “false consciousness” based on ethnic chauvinism or religious dogma; instead, it demands an end to class oppression through redistribu-

³ In this regard, I associate myself with Lustick’s argument about the role of great powers in preventing the rise of revisionist hegemons in the Middle East. See Ian S. Lustick, “The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political ‘Backwardness’ in Historical Perspective,” *International Organization* 51:4 (1997): 653–83.

⁴ Malcolm B. Hamilton, “The Elements of the Concept of Ideology,” *Political Studies* 35:1 (1987): 18.

⁵ John Gerring, “Ideology: A Definitional Analysis,” *Political Research Quarterly* 50:4 (1997): 957.

⁶ John T. Jost, Christopher M. Federico, and Jamie L. Napier, “Political Ideology: Its Structure, Functions, and Elective Affinities,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 60: 307–37.

tive economic policies and state control over national industries. By empowering the laboring classes, communists envision an ideal polity that is egalitarian regardless of the ethnic and religious makeup of society. Although communist movements and parties have inspired mass political mobilization in the Middle East—for example, the Tudeh Party in Iran or Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey—communism as an ideology did not have a sustained appeal in comparison to nationalism and fundamentalism. Nonetheless, the ideals of revolutionary socialism, including social justice, public ownership of national resources, state-led economic modernization and industrial development (*étatisme*), and a redistributive welfare system, informed the policies of several Arab nationalist movements, such as the Baathists in Iraq and Syria.

Nationalism is another substantive ideology. It valorizes an *ethnie* presumably anchored in a common history, language, cultural heritage, or geography. It demands a nation-state that guards against foreign domination, ethnic marginalization, or territorial abrogation. In the Middle East, nationalism has had the greatest mass appeal in the twentieth century. Nationalism inspired the formation of Israel by the Zionist movement in 1948, an anticolonial war of liberation in Algeria from 1954 to 1962, and the nationalization of the joint-owned British and French Suez Canal in Egypt in 1956. Nationalism inspired the movement of pan-Arabism, which in its heyday demanded the unification of Arab states into a single Arab republic.

Religious fundamentalism is yet another substantive ideology that has captured the imagination of mass publics in the Middle East. Islamism became ascendant in the 1970s as Arab nationalism waned in popularity. Islamism harkens back to a mythical golden age when a religious community was governed by pious authorities that ruled by divine law. It rejects the secular ideal of separating religion from politics and asserts the right of religious authorities to shape all aspects of the public sphere, including the media, education, politics, and the law. Islamists, like nationalists, have profoundly shaped the politics of the region. Islamists helped topple a dictatorship in Iran in 1978–9, assassinated a president in Egypt in 1981, and inspired a transnational terrorist network to attack the United States on September 11, 2001. Islamism continues to inspire adherents to overturn the Middle East state system and replace it with an Islamic caliphate.

These substantive worldviews help political actors articulate demands for particular sociopolitical institutions. They speak to notions of a just political order and the purpose of collective mobilization and personal sacrifice, and to deeply held principled commitments that imbue state and nonstate actors with public legitimacy.

Functionally, ideology can be deployed instrumentally as strategic framing to achieve specific goals in periods of social crises or political mobilization. While ideology is ever-present in the day-to-day politics of the Middle East, it is in periods of civil conflicts, interstate wars, or political crises that it manifests clearly as highly contextualized mobilizing narratives that seek to activate collective identities, articulate national grievances, identify specific enemies, justify violence, build coalitional alliances, and outline the stages necessary for sociopolitical change.

Three dimensions of ideology are central to its utility during periods of instability. The first is *conflict framing*, the act of demarcating the core political, religious, or social categories that constitute one's ingroup and outgroups. Conflict framing builds on the constructivist insight that collective identities are not primordial; they are socially constituted through state

practices and group identity formation processes.⁷ Multiparty conflicts that involve a diverse set of ethnic and religious communities, as well as regional and international forces, require state elites and dissident groups to mobilize the communities that can best advance their objectives. Conflict frames allow both state and nonstate actors to articulate which social categories constitute allies and which ones pose the most salient threat to the ingroup. They establish the targets of hostility by fostering ingroup favoritism and outgroup hatred. Scholars have observed this phenomenon during critical periods of political transition and mass violence, such as independence for former Soviet republics, the breakup of Yugoslavia, and the Rwandan genocide.⁸ In each of these cases, political leaders labeled certain categories of people as existential threats to one's ingroup. This boundary activation is central to both pan-Arabism and Islamism, each of which defines a set of internal and external adversaries against whom the ingroup must unite—and fight.

The second functional dimension of ideology pertains to what state and nonstate actors put forward as their *ideal polity*, which is the normatively prescriptive dimension of ideology that guides supporters toward the desired end state. Political actors of different ideological stripes advance competing conceptions of the ideal polity during periods of national crisis, democratic transition, or state collapse. Their competing worldviews not only frame the contest between dissidents and incumbent elites, but also pit dissimilar social movements or political parties against each other. Divergence over the future of the polity and its sociopolitical institutions can thus establish the factional landscape in which competing political organizations vie for public legitimacy, members, local allies, external state sponsors, and international recognition. In the Middle East, both pan-Arab nationalists and Islamists advanced competing conceptions of the ideal polity. The former called for secular modernization through state-led development, while the latter demanded an Islamic renaissance based on empowering religious authorities and curtailing westernization and secularism. But within each movement, there were also serious disagreements about what nationalism and Islamism ought to entail and how it should be advanced. These differences produced internal factionalism and leadership rivalries that fragmented their movements.

The third functional dimension of ideology revolves around *territorial aspirations*. State weakness creates an opening for new ways to conceive of the national map, creating friction among uncompromising secessionists, radical irredentists, and national loyalists. Indeed, anti-colonial nationalists and separatist movements have inspired many civil conflicts during the Cold War and post-Cold War era, resulting in 131 sovereign states coming into existence since 1945.⁹ In the Middle East, pan-Arab nationalists sought to redraw the map of the region by

⁷ I am indebted to Michael Gabbay and Emily Gade for shaping my thinking about how best to conceptualize ideology in concrete ways. Together we used these concepts to study ideological cooperation and infighting in the Syrian civil war. See Emily Kalah Gade, Michael Gabbay, Mohammed M. Hafez, and Zane Kelly, "Networks of Cooperation: Rebel Alliances in Fragmented Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63:9 (2019): 2071–97; and Emily Kalah Gade, Mohammed M. Hafez, and Michael Gabbay, "Fratricide in Rebel Movements: A Network Analysis of Syrian Militant Infighting," *Journal of Peace Research* 56:3 (2019): 321–35.

⁸ Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Stuart J. Kaufman, "Symbolic Politics or Rational Choice? Testing Theories of Extreme Ethnic Violence," *International Security* 30:4 (2006): 45–86.

⁹ Ryan D. Griffiths, *Age of Secession: The International and Domestic Determinants of State Birth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Table 4.1 Examples of dimensions of ideology in the Middle East

Ideological dimensions	Functions	Examples
Conflict framing	• Demarcate ingroups and outgroups • Specify preferred conflict dyad or prioritize the most threatening outgroup • Establish targets of violence	• Nationalist framing (e.g. Iraqi citizens vs American occupiers) • Islamist framing (e.g. believers vs apostates) • Sectarian framing (e.g. Sunnis vs Shi'is) • Socialist framing (e.g. workers vs capitalists) • Liberal framing (people vs dictatorship)
Ideal polity	• Preferred state order and its sociopolitical institutions	• Marxists demand a socialist polity • Islamists call for <i>shariah</i> rule • Zionists want a Jewish state • Liberals insist on a democratic order
Territorial aspirations	• Preferred boundaries of the ideal polity	• Nationalists prefer to maintain the boundaries of their sovereign state • Separatists seek autonomy or independence from the central state • Irredentists claim territory that previously belonged to them

erasing boundaries created by imperial powers. Today, the Islamic State is striving to abrogate the Westphalian system of sovereign states by carving territories out of existing countries and linking them to a transnational and noncontiguous conception of a pan-Islamic caliphate.

In summary, ideology in the Middle East is operationalized substantively as a set of political beliefs that legitimizes state and nonstate actors and differentiates them from rival political elites, and functionally as a series of mobilization narratives that revolve around conflict framing, ideal polity, and territorial aspirations. Conflict framing helps establish a common understanding of the social categories in society, and in turn can define who is a legitimate part of the community and who is an intruder that threatens the ingroup. The ideal polity envisions the desired political and economic order that should serve as a binding social contract between the ruler and the governed. Territorial aspirations specify the physical boundaries of the nation, which can range from maintaining the territorial integrity of an existing country (that is, nationalism) to abrogating its borders through secession (that is, separatism) or reclaiming lost lands from those who currently occupy them (that is, irredentism). These mobilization narratives can subdivide political movements into rival factions due to disagreements about who is the main ingroup and outgroup, what constitutes an ideal polity, and how to draw the territorial boundaries of this polity.

Table 4.1 offers some examples of each of the three ideological dimensions.¹⁰

¹⁰ I am not claiming that these three dimensions are exhaustive of ideology as such, even though I think they offer a great deal of analytical leverage to study multiple types of political actors during periods of instability and conflict. Admittedly, ideology is a much broader concept that encompasses ethics and morality, rhetoric, and imagery, as well as historical narratives, social norms, and organizational cultures. To preserve parsimony, I do not explicitly include these other dimensions in discussing the Middle East, but they can inform it contextually.

THE IDEOLOGY OF PAN-ARAB NATIONALISM

The demise of the Ottoman Empire following World War I enabled Britain and France to redraw the boundaries of the Middle East along their preferred spheres of influence, divvying up territorial possessions as mandatory powers. The newly created Arab states did not correspond to the preferences of local Arab populations or a clear-cut alignment between ethno-religious demographics and state borders. On the contrary, these were states without nations; state formation preceded national identity formation. Arab elites had to reconcile their status as both leaders of newly formed states and attendants of imperial acquisitions. This proved to be a challenge, as political leaders and local notables had to navigate the contradiction between an emerging norm of Arab solidarity in opposition to imperial territorial fragmentation and the benefits of taking the helm of politically organized states under imperial tutelage.

In this context, Sati al-Husri and Michel Aflaq, two Arab intellectuals, began to flesh out the ideas that ushered in Arab nationalism as a legitimizing ideology of aspiring leaders. Husri advanced nationalism through education in Iraq, while Aflaq worked through a cadre of political activists and military officers vying for power in Syria. Both had grandiose ideological visions that transcended their state nationalism; they called for pan-Arabism. At its core, pan-Arabism represented the desire to create a single supranational Arab state (*wuhda qawmiyya*) united by a common language, culture, and historical experience. Both Husri and Aflaq called for the territorial and political unification of the entire Arab world by erasing the artificial boundaries imposed by western imperialism and affirming the mutual affinity and solidarity (*urubah*) of all Arabs regardless of their geographic distance, local dialects, and national flags. Manufactured borders divided the one Arab nation (*al-ummah al-Arabiyya*) into many local states, and in doing so undermined their potential strength in unity. Zionism, in particular, was an important outgroup for pan-Arab nationalists because it symbolized European efforts to implant a foreign body in the heart of the Arab world.

For Husri, the main ingroup is the Arab-speaking members of society. He asserted that unity of language is the basis for all nationalisms, and this linguistic requirement was the main ascriptive identity necessary to qualify as part of the Arab nation.¹¹ Shared history was another important element of nationalism because it reflected the nation's collective memory of its past and formed its understanding of its common destiny. Although Islam was an important dimension of Arab history, Husri's notion of Arab nationalism was secular in nature. He argued that the Arabic language predated the rise of Islam, and the Islamic religion extends far beyond the Arab nation to encompass non-Arab speakers. Additionally, there are Arab Christians and Jews, as well as Shi'a, Alawites, and Druze that reside outside of the majoritarian Sunni Islamic orthodoxy, making Islam a potentially problematic component of Arabism. While Muslims were not an outgroup for Husri, they were not the defining feature of the Arab ingroup.

Aflaq, one of the founders of the Arab Baath (Renaissance or Resurrection) party in Syria, also insisted on the territorial unification of Arab countries, but he infused socialism with nationalism when envisioning the pan-Arab ideal polity.¹² Socialism is not to be confused with

¹¹ L.M. Kenny, "Sati' Al-Husri's Views on Arab Nationalism," *Middle East Journal* 17:3 (1963): 231–56; William L. Cleveland, *The Making of an Arab Nationalist: Ottomanism and Arabism in the Life and Thought of Sati' Al-Husri* (Princeton University Press, 1971).

¹² Gordon H. Torrey, "The Ba'ath: Ideology and Practice," *Middle East Journal* 24:4 (1969), 450–4.

communism, which he rejected. Communists viewed Arab nationalism as a false consciousness and no substitute for class struggle and internationalism, and thus linked Arab destiny with the fate of a foreign entity, the Soviet Union. Aflaq insisted on Arab independence in the fullest sense. Socialism referred to social justice (*al-adalah al-ijtimaiyya*), progressive redistributive economics, universal and compulsory education for men and women, universal healthcare, and suppression of traditional elites and the landed gentry that benefited from economic inequalities, political privileges, and imperial collaboration. Socialism also required the state to oversee internal industrial development and international trade. Lastly, socialism entailed requiring the wealthier parts of the Arab world to share their resources with the less endowed Arab regions. It was through socialism that Arabs could stand on their own two feet, realize their potential as one indivisible people, and shed their dependence on external powers to achieve their ideal polity.

When it came to Islam, Aflaq, unlike Husri, recognized the Islamic heritage as a core component of Arab cultural identity and history. Paradoxically, as a Greek Orthodox Christian and a staunch secularist, Aflaq held that the Islamic religion was integral to Arab identity, and Arab nationalism was the modern-day expression of Islam's glory.¹³ However, he did not go so far as to claim an exclusive right for Muslims to lead Arab nationalism. Indicative of the secular nature of the Baath Party, Islam was not included within its slogan of "Arab unity, freedom and socialism."

The ideology of pan-Arabism became ascendant with the rise of President Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt in 1954. As one of the Free Officers that overthrew the monarchy that lost the 1948 war with Israel, Nasser successfully merged the emerging themes of pan-Arabism—anti-imperialism, nationalism, anti-Zionism, and state socialism—with his charismatic personality and skillful oration. Nasser's anti-imperialism manifested in his Third World stance, which insisted on nonalignment with either of the two Cold War Superpowers. He also demanded that all Arab states should refrain from joining coalitions with western countries, which put him in direct opposition to the 1955 Baghdad Pact, a collective security alliance among Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and Britain. Additionally, he supported the Algerian and Palestinian national liberation struggles, earning him the ire of the French and Israelis, respectively. Nasser's anti-imperialism culminated with the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, which catapulted him to the role of leader of Arab nationalism, especially after he survived a tripartite invasion by Israel, Britain, and France to reclaim the canal and remove him from power.

Nasser expressed the theme of nationalism by insisting on erasing the Sykes–Picot-inspired borders imposed on the Arab nation. In 1958 he agreed to lead a union between Syria and Egypt, but the merger into the United Arab Republic (UAR) proved to be short-lived; it dissolved in 1961. The failure of territorial unification led Nasser to focus on challenging Israel as a colonial implantation. Nasser's anti-Zionism advanced his popularity in the Arab world and solidified Israel as the primary outgroup against the Arab ingroup. He insisted on the elimination of the Jewish state and the restoration of its territories to the Arab nation. But, similar to the failure of territorial unification, the effort against Israel failed terribly in the 1967 Six-Day War.

¹³ Michaëlle L. Browsers, *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

Nasserism also focused inward on remaking the newly created Egyptian republic into a secular and egalitarian polity. His socialist policies entailed the expansion of secondary and university education for men and women, development of public sector employment, promotion of state-led industrialization, and implementation of land reforms. Nasser also nationalized religious endowments and repressed the Muslim Brotherhood. In doing so, he affirmed that Arabs, not Muslims writ large, were the main ingroup; and Arabism, not Islamism, was the ideal polity.

Ultimately, pan-Arab nationalism failed to achieve most of its objectives. When it came to territorial unity, the Arab world today is fragmented into 22 countries. When it came to anti-Zionism, Israel today is one of the strongest and most thriving states of the Middle East, garnering recognition from several Arab countries and the Palestinian Authority. Its territory has expanded threefold since 1967 and today it has complete control of Jerusalem, a holy city to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. When it came to socialism, Arab states could only sustain meager economic growth after showing some early successes. Instead, administrative inefficiencies, elite corruption, and masked unemployment overshadowed the progressive intent of socialist policies, which were replaced by economic liberalization in subsequent decades. The one success pan-Arab nationalists could claim was their resistance to western imperialism by driving out the British and French from Arab territories by the 1960s.

The failure of pan-Arab nationalists can be attributed to the many obstacles they faced, not the least of which is the ambitious—even utopian—nature of their territorial unification project. Territorial unity would have required overcoming challenges associated with geographic distance; local cultures and dialects; religious, tribal, and sectarian differences; and non-Arab communities that pursued their own nationalisms, including the Kurds and Israel. But two other factors played major roles in disrupting the plans of pan-Arab nationalists: entrenched elites that valued state nationalism (*wataniya*) above pan-Arab nationalism (*qawmiya*),¹⁴ and foreign intervention against nationalist forces.¹⁵

The power of pan-Arab solidarity could not overcome opposition from established governments that viewed pan-Arabism as a threat to their regime survival. As Arab states formed after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and as they gained independence from the British and the French, ruling families and revolutionary leaders came to control these states and consolidated power by exclusively managing the state's economic resources and using them to develop powerful internal security structures.¹⁶ They also developed their own local nationalisms and used state educational and media institutions to propagate state patriotism and veneration of their ruling regimes.¹⁷ By the 1950s, the development of entrenched regimes in the Arab world meant that pan-Arabism under Nasser would encroach on their interests and erase their state-building achievements.

¹⁴ Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century, From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹⁶ James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24:2 (1999): 131–65.

¹⁷ Michael N. Barnett, "Sovereignty, Nationalism, and Regional Order in the Arab States System," *International Organization* 49:3 (1995): 479–510; Laurie A. Brand, *Official Stories: Politics and National Narratives in Egypt and Algeria* (Stanford University Press, 2014).

Nasser, as the icon of Arabism, left little room for other challengers to claim the mantle of Arab nationalism. Nasser's hegemonic bid for leadership of pan-Arabism compelled local regimes to seek ways to undermine his ambitions. Syrian nationalists called for a Greater Syria confined to the Levant as an alternative to pan-Arabism. When those opponents of Nasser were pushed aside by Baathists, the latter challenged Nasser for his cult of personality and failure to take decisive military action against Israel. This rhetorical outbidding contributed to Egypt's abysmal failure in the 1967 Six-Day War. Lebanon's political elites, particularly those representing Maronite Christians, rejected Nasserism for its apparent link to international communism and appealed to western forces to come to their aid in 1958. Hashemites in Iraq and Jordan were also deeply threatened by talk of "overthrowing reactionary regimes" that was clearly pointed at them, so they created their own unification scheme, known as the Arab Federation, to counter the formation of the UAR in 1958.¹⁸ Saudi Arabia, the largest Arab country by land mass and the place of Islam's two holy sanctuaries, rejected the secularist and progressive orientation of pan-Arabism and insisted on coordination among Arabs through the Arab League as an alternative to territorial unification. The Saudis also fought a proxy war against Nasser and his progressive revolutionary forces during Yemen's civil war (1962–70).¹⁹ Thus, while the Arab masses greatly admired Nasser, their leaders did not wish to be dominated by him. Instead, they sought to balance against Nasserism in what came to be known as the Arab Cold War.²⁰

Local opponents of pan-Arabism benefited tremendously from western intervention. The rise of pan-Arabism coincided with the emerging Cold War system that pitted the United States against the Soviet Union. It also coincided with British and French imperial decline, which required the US to assume the role of a powerbroker to guarantee three strategic goals: prevent Soviet expansion, secure access to oil, and ensure Israel's survival.²¹ Although the US favored decolonization of the Middle East and North Africa, it did not favor the strident rhetoric of pan-Arab nationalists, particularly their socialist orientation and increasing reliance on Soviet arms. America preferred to maintain the status quo of the regional state system constructed by the imperial powers and was willing to intervene militarily to restore regimes and borders when necessary.

In 1953, the American and British intelligence agencies jointly orchestrated a coup that toppled the Iranian nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, two years after he nationalized the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Although Iran was not part of the Arab world, Operation Ajax signaled the willingness of western powers to intervene on behalf of status quo regimes in the name of fighting communist expansion in the Middle East. In 1958, invoking the Eisenhower Doctrine, the US intervened militarily in Lebanon to prevent the toppling of President Camille Chamoun, whose rule was threatened by Arab nationalists that wanted Lebanon to join the UAR. That same year, British forces landed in Jordan to shore up King Hussein after his Hashemite brethren in Iraq were violently toppled by nationalist

¹⁸ Jeffrey G. Karam, ed., *The Middle East in 1958: Reimagining a Revolutionary Year* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020).

¹⁹ Jesse Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

²⁰ Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958–1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

²¹ Michael C. Hudson, "To Play the Hegemon: Fifty Years of US Policy toward the Middle East," *Middle East Journal* 50:3 (1996): 329–43.

forces. When the British completed their withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971, the US became the guarantor of the region's security architecture to ensure freedom of navigation for oil and prevent any threats to pliant Gulf monarchies. Two decades later the US directly intervened to reverse Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait, after previously supporting his invasion of Iran.

In sum, revisionist forces that sought to topple local regimes and redraw the map of the Middle East were opposed at every step by Arab states engaged in balancing against pan-Arab nationalists and by foreign interventions that raised formidable military barriers to pan-Arab unity. The internal fragmentation of the Arab nationalist camp, which at one point pitted the Baathists of Syria against the Baathists of Iraq, deprived their movement of the ideological cohesion and power in unity necessary to overcome adversarial regional states and their foreign backers. But while territorial unification did not materialize, the ideal of pan-Arab solidarity has an enduring presence in the consciousness of Arab masses. In many respects, the rise of Islamism did not displace pan-Arabism but coopted its underlying populist sentiment, with a new ideological garb.

THE IDEOLOGY OF PAN-ISLAMISM

Pan-Islamic solidarity has been a recurring theme in the modern Muslim world. From the early Islamic modernists to contemporary global jihadists, the vision of pan-Islamism has been both a captivating aspiration and an elusive destination. Since the 1880s, confronted with the triple challenge of orientalism, imperialism, and colonialism, Muslim reformers had to contend with the dual, perhaps contradictory, challenge of defending their borders from western encroachment while also promoting internal reforms that took their inspiration from western scientific and material progress.²² The progressive themes promoted by Islamic modernists were eventually coopted by an emergent secular nationalist elite in the first half of the twentieth century, but the many failures of the postcolonial state opened the door to religious fundamentalism and, once again, the mantra of pan-Islamic unity.²³

The year 1979 was a particularly monumental one for pan-Islamic solidarity. The Iranian Revolution marked the beginning of Islamist ascendancy after decades of marginalization and retreat, and unleashed the power of the *mostazafin* (oppressed) to challenge entrenched authoritarian regimes. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan inspired a transnational movement of foreign fighters to aid the Afghans in their struggle against the communist occupiers, giving birth to a global jihadist movement that persists to this day. These new Islamist voices represented a radical search for an ideological alternative to increasingly unpopular secular governments characterized by political exclusion, economic corruption, and military weakness.²⁴

Islamists promised to usher in a new golden age in which Muslims are ascendant, dignified, unified, and, above all else, ruled with justice. This utopian narrative, presumably anchored in

²² Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 47.

²³ Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism*, 278.

²⁴ Mohammed M. Hafez, "Illegitimate Governance: The Roots of Islamist Radicalization in the MENA," in *Governance in the Middle East and North Africa: A Handbook*, edited by Abbas Kadhimi (New York: Routledge, 2013): 86.

actual golden ages of bygone times, contrasts with the palpable and complex reality of a diminished civilization struggling to forge its way forward after decades of imperial fragmentation, colonialism, and uneven modernization under secular authoritarian regimes.

The four most prominent ideologues of Islamism in the twentieth century were Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement in 1928; Abul Ala Mawdudi, the founder of the South Asian Jama'at-i Islami movement in 1941; Sayyid Qutb, a leading intellectual in the Muslim Brotherhood movement; and Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian Revolution.

Hassan al-Banna was a school teacher that was disappointed with the secular turn Egypt was taking during the first two decades of the twentieth century and at British domination of his country. In 1928 he founded an activist organization, the Society of Muslim Brothers, which eventually spread to nearly every part of the Muslim world. The Muslim Brotherhood was a revivalist movement, not a violent jihadist group. It concentrated on moral and social issues; its goal was to win the hearts and minds of ordinary people and turn them toward religious observance and piety.

Abul Ala Mawdudi was a journalist whose views were deeply shaped by the anticolonial struggle in India. He was also influenced by the India–Pakistan split in 1947 and actively called for the formation of an Islamic state in opposition to secular nationalism. Like Banna, Mawdudi formed a formidable and influential movement known as the Jama'at-i Islami. This vanguard organization aimed to Islamize society by winning over the professional middle classes and students.

Both Banna and Mawdudi viewed Islam as a complete worldview that does not recognize a separation between religion and politics. Return to Islam was the solution to the persistent weakness of Muslims in the modern world. They both interpreted the western threat not merely in terms of military hegemony or economic domination, but also in terms of a cultural invasion supplanting Islam with alien values.

The turn to Islamist radicalism came with Sayyid Qutb and Ayatollah Khomeini. Qutb lived during the heyday of pan-Arab nationalism and became alienated from Nasserism. Khomeini lived through the political tumult that shaped Iran in the twentieth century and deplored western interference in support of a secular monarchy bent on westernizing Iran. Both advanced an uncompromising vision of Islamism that was absolute and totalizing. And both called for a continuous rebellion against the tyranny of secularism and were willing to confront their regimes with violence.

Qutb rejected pan-Arabism because it was a narrow identity that deprived Muslims of a more powerful and inclusive basis for solidarity—Islam. Islam does not recognize race, ethnicity, or class differences. Piety in worshipping the one God was the only meaningful basis for unity. Islam was divinely inspired and thus an infallible source of guidance, while nationalism and secularism were human-centered innovations that lacked the authority of divinity. For Qutb, the Muslim world had completely shunned religion and turned toward modern ideologies that alienated it from its ultimate purpose of affirming God's sovereignty. In 1965, while in prison, Qutb wrote a controversial manifesto, *Milestones*. In it, he declared the Egyptian government to be polytheistic, reverting back to the pre-Islamic era (*jahiliyya*); it should be overthrown and replaced with an Islamic one. A year later, he was executed by Nasser.

Ayatollah Khomeini shared many of the critiques of secularism advanced by Banna, Mawdudi, and Qutb.²⁵ However, he went a step further by advocating for an Islamic government organized around the “guardianship of the jurist”—*velayat-e faqih*—which left the ultimate decision-making authority in the hands of Iran’s Shi’i clergy, because they were the most informed about Islamic law in the absence of the Awaited Redeemer. This uniquely Iranian version of Islamism, which unapologetically embraced Shi’i idioms, rituals, and textual authorities, limited its appeal to Sunni Islamists and created an opportunity for Khomeini’s Arab detractors to frame the Iranian Revolution as sectarian in nature.²⁶ However, the Iranian Revolution inspired pan-Shi’ism in the Middle East and the Iranian regime facilitated the spread of Shi’i networks of solidarity, activism, and militancy to shield Iran from regional and international adversaries.²⁷

Islamists did not just offer a critique of the existing political order; they also advanced social and charitable projects to present a tangible alternative to secular governments and manifest the goals of their ideal polity. Networks of charity were created by Islamic activists who saw an opportunity to present viable public spaces free from the corrupting influence of the secular state, as well as to foster legitimacy for the Islamic movement through tangible provisions to the public.²⁸ Islamic groups, when possible, formed parties in order to challenge the hold of secular nationalists on government. Their ultimate aim was to establish governments bound by Islamic law (*shariah*). Those that were excluded from the political process sometimes organized violent rebellions.²⁹ And when those rebellions failed, they went abroad to advance a transnational Islamist movement against their regimes and the countries that back them.

Yet, more than four decades after the Iranian Revolution, visions of pan-Islamism are once again in tatters. Islamists fared no better than their secular nationalist predecessors in forging unity across political and geographical barriers. The failure of Islamism to transform the Middle East has similar causes to those of failed pan-Arabism: internal fragmentation and external intervention.

Despite their shared normative vision, Islamists like their nationalist counterparts disagreed about ingroups and outgroups, the specific vision of the ideal polity, and their territorial aspirations. Since the 1980s, at least three forms of Islamism have emerged. *Political Islamism*, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood tendency, sought entry into state institutions through electoral politics and civic engagement. These political Islamists shunned violence against their regimes and instead pursued gradual, constitutional means even within authoritarian systems that heavily circumscribed democratic contestation. Their ideal polity increasingly

²⁵ Emmanuel Sivan, “Sunni Radicalism in the Middle East and the Iranian Revolution,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21 (February 1989): 1–30.

²⁶ Sivan, “Sunni Radicalism,” 15.

²⁷ John Chipman, *Iran’s Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019).

²⁸ Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Janine A. Clark, *Islam, Charity, and Activism: Middle-Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

²⁹ Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

gravitated toward Islamic democracy, not an exclusively religious state.³⁰ Similarly, their territorial aspirations were confined to national states, not a grand Islamic caliphate. In contrast, *revolutionary Islamism* sought to overthrow the political system and establish an Islamic order in its place. Armed Islamic groups rebelled against the state, targeted its symbols of “apostasy,” and undermined its economic infrastructure. They insist on an ideal polity based on the comprehensive application of Islamic law and rejection of political pluralism within the confines of their national state. *Transnational jihadism* extended the radical ethos of revolutionary Islamists across national boundaries and attacked western governments that supported their local regimes.³¹ Whereas revolutionary Islamists targeted their governments, treating the “near enemy” as the main outgroup, transnational jihadism placed strategic value on attacking western states, the “far enemy.”³²

Jihadi Salafism, the ideology of transnational jihadism today, is the latest attempt by militant Islamists to envision pan-Islamic solidarity. At its point of origin in the 1990s, Jihadi Salafism represented a clear alternative to prevailing forms of Islamic activism, principally the nationally based Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood, the non-violent activism of Salafist preachers, and the political quietism of Salafist scholars. Thus, from the moment of its birth, the Jihadi Salafist movement represented the further fragmentation of Islamism into three broad factions of *quietists*, *activists*, and *jihadists*.³³

The latest manifestation of fragmentation involves the split between Al-Qaeda and Islamic State. Even though they have much in common and share the same state adversaries, they disagree about their territorial aspirations. Although both Al-Qaeda and Islamic State share the ambition of establishing an Islamic caliphate that unites the *ummah* (Muslim nation) across borders, they disagree about the strategic priorities necessary to achieve this long-term objective. Al-Qaeda maintains that establishing Islamic states is not a priority under present circumstances. The priority is to support rebellions against secular regimes, establish Al-Qaeda’s organizational presence in those conflict zones to grow its transnational network, and attack western states that shore up their oppressive governments. Islamic State, on the other hand, is less patient and wishes to carve out territory within or across sovereign state boundaries to establish a formal state to be governed with Islamic law.³⁴

Shi’i Islamism promoted by Iran since the 1980s fared a little better than its Sunni counterpart, but this movement is equally divided by competing visions of the ideal polity and the issue of territorial loyalty. In Iraq, for example, Shi’i religious authorities, parties, and militias are fragmented into two broad factions. The first advances pan-Shi’ism by committing itself

³⁰ Some Islamic democrats have formulated this evolution toward democratic participation as favoring a “civil state with an Islamic source of authority” (*dawla madaniyya dhat marji’iyya Islamiyya*). See Limor Lavie, “The Idea of the Civil State in Egypt: Its Evolution and Political Impact following the 2011 Revolution,” *Middle East Journal* 71:1 (2017), 31.

³¹ Mohammed M. Hafez, “Martyrs without Borders: The Puzzle of Transnational Suicide Bombers,” in M. Breen-Smyth, ed. *The Ashgate Companion to Political Violence* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2012): 185–204.

³² Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³³ Mohammed M. Hafez, “Radicalization in the Persian Gulf: Assessing the Potential of Islamist Militancy in Saudi Arabia and Yemen,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 1:1 (2008): 1–19.

³⁴ Mohammed M. Hafez, “The Crisis within Jihadism: The Islamic State’s Puritanism vs. al-Qaeda’s Populism,” *CTC Sentinel* 13:9 (2020): 40–6.

to protect Iran's security and strategic interests in the Middle East, and by aiding Shi'i communities in conflict zones inside and outside of Iraq. This faction is loyal to Iran's Supreme Leader and officially embraces the governing principle of *velayat-e faqih*, thus theoretically placing Iraq's Shi'i communities under the religious authority of an Iranian leader. The second faction is populist and Iraqi nationalist. It rejects Iran's theory of rule of the jurists and insists on maintaining Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity by opposing Iranian interference in Iraqi politics and the presence of Iranian forces and armed proxies inside Iraq.³⁵

The fragmentation of Islamism was not the only reason why it failed to transform the territorial boundaries of the Middle East; regional states and external interventions were also essential to containing Islamism. The Iranian Revolution was immediately confronted with an eight-year war waged by Iraq with the support of the Gulf countries and the US. New Islamist parties that emerged to challenge their ruling governments were often suppressed by their regimes, yet western countries fearing the "Green Menace" turned a blind eye to human rights violations and even offered security assistance to these repressive states. During the 1990s, as Islamists rebelled against their authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Algeria, the US and France, respectively, extended plenty of intelligence and security cooperation to help those states defeat their Islamist movements.³⁶ Iran's pan-Shi'i network of Islamist militias have also encountered a sustained military campaign from regional states—Israel and Saudi Arabia—and the US. More recently, the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its declaration of an Islamic caliphate prompted an international coalition to destroy this emerging entity and roll back its territorial gains. In sum, similar to pan-Arab nationalists, Islamists could not overcome a substantial military hurdle imposed by western interventionism in their quest to transform the boundaries and political order of the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East regional system presents an interesting paradox. From its point of origins in the 1920s to the present, Middle Eastern states have been mired in crises, anticolonial struggles, military coups, civil wars, interstate conflicts, and mass revolutions. Yet, despite all this instability, the Sykes–Picot-inspired borders formed by imperial powers following World War I have remained essentially the same. Despite gaining independence and international recognition as sovereign states, few have actually experienced major territorial modifications that lasted more than a few years; the notable exceptions are Israel, Yemen, and South Sudan.

This paradox is even more puzzling because the two major transnational ideological movements in the twentieth century—pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism—were bent on fundamentally changing the nature and boundaries of Middle Eastern states. Both inspired mass devotion that crystalized into political parties, revolutionary movements, and state governments. Millions marched in the streets in support of these ideologies and many perished fighting for a unified Arab and Islamic order. At times, these movements appeared on the verge of succeeding, and some were able to overthrow their local regimes. Yet despite their dedication and willingness

³⁵ Benjamin Isakhan and Peter E. Mulherin, "Shi'i Division over the Iraqi State: Decentralization and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 47:3 (2020): 361–80.

³⁶ Fawaz A. Gerges, *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

to sacrifice, both pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism ultimately failed to fundamentally remake the state structure imposed by western imperial powers following the First World War. Their ideological appeals had their limits when confronted with state power and western intervention.

This failure of ideologically motivated movements to affect change can be explained in large part by their internal fragmentation into competing factions, which enabled their local detractors and external powers to benefit from their factionalism and infighting. Both Arabism and Islamism lacked the necessary cohesion because each movement disagreed about core dimensions of their ideology, such as who their primary ingroups and outgroups were, what exactly their ideal polity was, or what the boundaries of their territorial aspirations were. These disagreements turned into schisms that split their adherents into competing camps that could not resist advancing their factional interests at the expense of their collective goals.

This fragmentation facilitated external intervention by western powers on behalf of status quo regimes. In several critical episodes in the ascendancy of pan-Arab nationalism and Islamism, local regimes needed western security cooperation, intelligence sharing, and direct military interventions to balance against these revisionist forces. In short, the potential of these two ideological movements to reorder the Middle East encountered the seemingly insurmountable barriers of entrenched regime interests and hegemonic powers bent on keeping the region as it was found a century earlier.

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5. Political parties in the Middle East: the unsolved problem of collective action

Marina Ottaway

INTRODUCTION

There are two major obstacles to democratization in the Middle East. The first, the one that receives the most attention, is the unwillingness of authoritarian rulers to give up some of their power and give a voice to their citizens. The second one, which receives much less attention but is equally serious, is the difficulty that citizens in most countries encounter in organizing for sustained, long-term collective action. Arab countries have experienced frequent outbursts of activism, manifested in numerous uprisings, since 2011. But such outbursts, driven by largely unorganized crowds, cannot last, as governments introduce repressive measures and citizens are pulled away from activism by the necessity to make a living. Long-term political participation requires routinized participation in politics and strong, independent political parties are key to this.

Parties in the Arab world are highly problematic organizations, however. Most countries have abandoned the single-party systems of the early post-independence period and political organizations have proliferated. Even the Gulf countries, which have long resisted any form of political participation, are reluctantly coming to accept that they cannot prevent it forever. But parties as they exist now contribute little to the emergence of routinized political participation and democracy. In many countries they are even willing participants in a pseudo-democratic process in which citizens have little voice.

Parties are the vehicle through which citizens participate in elections, but elections do not count for much in most Arab states. Although almost all countries now hold elections, the vote seldom determines where power is going to reside. The vote decides who sits in the parliament, but in the great majority of Arab countries real power resides elsewhere. In Francophone countries such as Algeria and Morocco, citizens commonly draw a distinction between *le gouvernement*, which consists of elected officials in formal institutions, and *le pouvoir*, where ultimate power and authority rest. *Le pouvoir* can be a monarch and his entourage, the military, or a president who has devised ways to hold elections which only he can win.¹ (The use of the masculine pronoun here and elsewhere in this paper is deliberate, because there are no women in Arab power structures.)

Citizens usually see through these sham elections and demonstrate their awareness by actively boycotting them or by simply not turning out to vote, leading to low voter participation.² Politicians, on the other hand, seem to attach a great deal of importance to the elections,

¹ See Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semiauthoritarianism* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

² Most charts of voters' participation around the globe omit the Middle East entirely. See, for example International IDEA, Voters Turnout Database, www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout accessed February 22, 2022. The database is constantly updated.

seeing them as a means of gaining entrance into the power game, as demonstrated by the astonishing number of political parties that register every time an election is called. Most are tools of the founder; win no seat, or one or two at best; and quickly disappear, only to reappear, often under a new name, before the next election.

Such parties have no real constituencies; thus, they do a poor job of aggregating the votes of like-minded people and creating a political force. They are not channels for sustained collective action. There are exceptions: Islamist parties in particular are cast in a more traditional mold, with strong structures, an organized following, and an ideology—organizationally, they seem to be Leninist parties. But secular parties—I will use the term for lack of a better one, although it is controversial—are generally organizationally weak.³

The fecklessness of most Arab secular political parties does not matter most of the time, because they are part of an empty game of formal elections that neither generate nor transfer power. However, the dysfunctionality of parties matters a great deal in moments of transition, when the old regime has been weakened and a transfer of power could occur if forces existed that were capable of creating an alternative. Unfortunately, events in the Arab world since the 2011 uprisings have shown that parties have not been able to create such alternatives. The openings and opportunities created by the protesters failed to translate into lasting change. The problem emerged again during the second wave of uprisings in 2018–19, when protest in Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon had extremely limited consequences. Only in Sudan did protesters have some success in creating a new political force, as I will discuss later.

THE INEVITABILITY OF POLITICAL PARTIES

No democratic system functions without political parties, although their existence is not prescribed by democratic constitutions. In fact, there has often been some resistance to the existence of political parties, based on the argument that they introduce divisions and partisanship in the body politic as they pursue their own interests.⁴ Indeed, in a system of direct democracy, where citizens participate directly in all decisions, political parties would be a hindrance. But there are few and always small-scale examples of direct democracy. In the real world of representative rather than direct democracy, where citizens elect representatives to make decisions for them, parties are both necessary and inevitable.

The political rights which democratic systems recognize to their citizens as individuals only become meaningful through collective actions. A lone vote has no impact. An individual writing in the name of a candidate who is not on the ballot is wasting time and effort, but an organized effort to write in a candidate can achieve results if enough people join in. Effective participants in democratic politics do not act on their own, but come together in the pursuit

³ The term secular is controversial because members of such parties fear it implies lack of piety and disdain for Islam. They prefer to be called liberal or leftist parties, although most of the time they are neither. Despite the objections, I believe the word secular is still the most accurate definition even for parties that are not militantly secular.

⁴ The most famous example of this fear of parties is President George Washington's Farewell Address, www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CDOC-105sdoc22/pdf/CDOC-105sdoc22.pdf accessed February 21, 2022.

of their goals. Whether they do so through formal political parties or informal coordination, collective action is a necessity.

Divisions in the body politic are also inevitable, as long as citizens are free to choose their positions. In complex societies—and all societies are complex, although to varying degrees—people have different interests and uphold different values. This is not a problem to be avoided; rather, it is the reason why democratic political systems exist: they give citizens an opportunity to defend those interests and uphold those values.

In a well-functioning democratic system, political parties perform the essential function of facilitating collective action and acknowledging and defining the differences in interests and values. Voters do not have to hunt for like-minded people and coordinate with them in order to be effective. They can just cast a vote for a political party whose platform articulates their goals and values. By garnering votes from many, the parties aggregate interests, and transform individual choice into collective action. In longstanding and not too obscure political science jargon, political parties serve to articulate and aggregate interests during the voting process and to represent those interest in the institutions where decisions are made.⁵

This is of course an idealized view of what political parties do. It leaves out many of their more unsavory aspects—the internal battles for power, often the lack of internal democracy, the corruption, the deviation from the stated goals after the elections, the bargaining that takes place with other political parties. Nevertheless, well-functioning parties by and large articulate, aggregate, and represent the interests of their constituents.

Most Arab political parties do not appear to fulfill even the most basic aspect of their task. This failure can best be understood in the framework of Arab political systems, since the political systems shape the parties as much as the parties shape the political system.

ARAB POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND POPULAR PARTICIPATION

This discussion focuses on the arch of countries from Morocco to Egypt, then on to the Levant, including Iraq, and south to the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, omitting other members of the Arab League.

One fundamental distinction among Arab political systems is between monarchies and republics. This is not a purely formal distinction. Arab monarchies have proven to be remarkably stable, while many republics have not. In fact, the resilience of the Arab monarchies has puzzled many who saw them as hopelessly outdated and expected many to face serious challenges or even disappear, particularly after the Islamic Revolution in Iran put an end to the rule of the shah.⁶

⁵ Gabriel Almond and James Coleman, eds, *The Politics of the Developing Areas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960). See also Gabriel Almond, "Interest Groups in the Political Process," *American Political Science Review* 52:1 (March 1958).

⁶ Lisa Anderson, "Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly* 106:1 (Spring 1991); Sean L. Yom and F. Gregort Gause III, "Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On," *Journal of Democracy* 23:4 (October 2012); Yasmina Abozzohour, "Heavy Lies the Crown: The Survival of Arab Monarchies, Ten Years after the Arab Spring," *Brookings Institution*, March 8, 2021. www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/03/08/heavy-lies-the-crown-the-survival-of-arab-monarchies-10-years-after-the-arab-spring/ accessed February 21, 2022.

Arab monarchies—and we include here kingdoms, emirates, and sultanates; in other words, any system where the ruler inherits his position—are indeed an anachronism. They are not modern constitutional monarchies, where the king rules but does not govern. Arab monarchs very much govern, although a few, such as the king of Morocco, claim to be constitutional monarchs because the country has a constitution. As long as there are no limits on the king's power, the existence of a constitution does not make a monarchy constitutional.

With the power in the hands of the monarch and succession remaining among members of the royal family, Arab monarchies are clearly authoritarian, giving citizens no real voice. But it is a modern-style authoritarianism: one by one, Arab monarchies have introduced elected parliaments with limited powers. However, executive power rests with the king; in countries where there is a prime minister, he is responsible to the monarch, not the parliament.

Although they are similar in terms of their stability and the concentration of power in the hands of the sovereign, Arab monarchies differ substantially in terms of the space they allow for participation. Morocco represents one end of the spectrum, Saudi Arabia the opposite. In neither country are there institutions that effectively limit the power of the king, but the Moroccan king at least pays lip service to respect for the country's constitution. The constitution of 2011, quickly drafted at the height of the Arab Spring on orders from the king to thwart a possible uprising, requires the king to appoint as prime minister the head of the political party that receives the largest number of votes in an election. The king has respected this provision, but he has maintained control over the composition of the government by influencing the composition of the governing coalitions. Such coalitions are necessary because the election system ensures that no party can get an absolute majority of the vote, and thus form a government on its own.

Because the Moroccan monarch knows he can have the last word whenever he wants, he has been willing to allow political parties to function fairly freely, including the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD), which has roots in the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷

In 2008, the king summoned into existence a new “palace” party by inviting a friend and political insider, Fouad el Himma, to set up the Party for Authenticity and Modernity (PAM). Based on the merger of five pre-existing small parties, the PAM had seats in parliament even before participating in an election.

Morocco is certainly not democratic, and the king's respect for the constitution has a strong element of ritualized Kabuki theatre in it. Nevertheless, Moroccan authoritarianism has been fairly benign for more than two decades, in stark contrast to its own past and certainly to other Arab monarchies. In Saudi Arabia, the power of the monarch is not only unfettered but increasing, as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has systematically eliminated traditional constraints.

Saudi Arabia has never allowed any form of political participation by the general public, except recently in the elections of the powerless local council. The *shura* council is only an advisory body with limited power and its members are appointed. Nevertheless, the royal family and the religious establishment have put some constraints on the power of the monarch, until recently.

⁷ The Party for Justice and Development, like most other moderate Islamist parties, has its intellectual roots in the Muslim Brotherhood but it has no formal affiliation with it. It is a particularly moderate organization, not only because it rejects violence but also because it deliberately seeks to cooperate with the monarchy, rather than to challenge it.

In a sense, the royal family has acted as the real *shura* council, ensuring balance among the branches of the very complex royal family, vetting the suitability of family members in the line of succession, and tempering the power of the king. The Wahabi clerical establishment had enormous authority over society, in exchange for staying out of politics.⁸ The division of labor between the al-Saud family that controls politics and the Wahabi establishment that controls society helps explain why Saudi Arabia has remained exceedingly conservative even by the standards of the Gulf countries. The royal family was able to slowly introduce some reforms opposed by the clerics in the past, such as education for women, with the first government schools for girls opening in 1964. The monarchy rarely challenged the religious establishment even when its dictates, such as banning women from driving, tarnished the country's reputation in the eyes of much of the world, and even in the neighboring Gulf countries.

The influence of the royal family and of the religious establishment has greatly diminished since the rise to power of King Salman in 2015 and his appointment of his son Mohammed bin Salman as crown prince two years later. Mohammed bin Salman is strengthening the power of the monarch while also pursuing economic modernization.

The crown prince has shown the utmost disregard for the royal family's role. He has pushed his father to disregard the decision-making process concerning succession so as to become crown prince. He has disregarded the balance of power among the various branches of the family, pushing out, or into the gilded prisons of their palaces, representatives of other branches and elevating himself and his brothers in their stead. In the name of fighting corruption, he has arrested many other members of the family and high-ranking officials, kept them prisoners in the Ritz Hotel in Riyadh, then sent them home minus most of their wealth.⁹

The crown prince has also sought to undermine, with remarkable success, the religious establishment. The religious police (known as the Society for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice) is no longer allowed to roam the streets enforcing the dress code, the closing of shops at prayer time, or any other violations of what it considers moral behavior. Much to the displeasure of the religious establishment, Mohammed Bin Salman has introduced entertainment—concerts, cinemas, sporting events attended by men and women alike—that appeared unthinkable only a few years ago. And women are now allowed to drive, and they have a little more leeway to make decisions for themselves without the permission of their male guardian. These were much needed reforms in a country stifled by a puritanical interpretation of Islam at odds with life in the twenty-first century and were welcomed with enthusiasm by young people, at least in urban areas. But the manner in which the reforms were

⁸ Wahabis, or Salafis as they prefer to call themselves, are members of an extremely conservative Islamic sect that developed in the central part of the country in the late eighteenth century. An alliance between the al-Wahab family and the al-Saud family played an important part in the consolidation of the kingdom both in the eighteenth century and after 1932 where the modern kingdom emerged. It is interesting to note that in February 22, 2022, Saudi Arabia celebrated the foundation of the kingdom three centuries earlier and downplayed the role of the Wahabi alliance. See for example, Aziz El Yaakoubi, "Saudi Arabia for the First Time Marks Its Founding, Downplaying Conservative Roots," *Reuters*, February 22, 2022. See also interview with Mohammed Bin Salman in *The Atlantic*, reported by the *Saudi Gazette*, March 4, 2022, "IbnAbdul Wahabb Is Not Saudi Arabia, Reaffirms Crown Prince." <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/617728/SAUDI-ARABIA/Ibn-Abdul-Wahhab-is-not-Saudi-Arabia-reaffirms-Crown-Prince> accessed March 4, 2022.

⁹ For more on Mohammed Bin Salman's policies, see David B. Ottaway, *Mohammed Bin Salman: The Icarus of Saudi Arabia?* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2021).

introduced—strictly from the top, without any sign of consultation—point to a strengthening of royal absolutism. In a telling example, the crown prince ordered the detention of women who were agitating for the right to drive at the same time he was planning to grant them that right. Reform is for him to give, not for citizens to demand.

Most Arab monarchies fall somewhere between Morocco and Saudi Arabia, but in all of them power resides at the top and all forms of participation are carefully choreographed. The lone exception is Kuwait, the one Gulf country where there is a true element of democracy, in that an elected parliament checks the power of the emir. But Kuwait also offers an example of how democracy can run amok. Emir and parliament have for years spent most of their efforts on trying to undermine each other rather than governing the country, with the parliament seeking to force the resignation of any government the emir sets up, and the emir in turn seeking to disband the parliament whenever he can.

Despite their peculiarities, Arab monarchies have been remarkably stable. They have come through the period of the Arab uprisings virtually unscathed and have succeeded in keeping radical movements under control.¹⁰ Not so the republican regimes. Since the Arab Spring uprisings started in 2011, there have been regime changes in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Sudan. Leaders have been forced out of office in Algeria and Egypt, although the military establishments that backed them still hold power. In Syria and Iraq the regimes have been badly shaken, although they appear to be surviving thanks to, respectively, Russian and US support. And Lebanon is once again on the brink of collapse as a country, although it will probably survive as it did in the past. Indeed, there is not a single republic not shaken by the uprisings.

The most stable republican regimes have been those where the military was the ultimate power behind the government. Egypt and Algeria were headed by civilian presidents, but it was the military that provided the muscle to keep them in their position. Events in the two countries unfolded many years apart—in 2011 in Egypt and 2019 in Algeria—but they followed the same pattern: civilian protesters demanded the president's resignation and the military readily accepted his demise, thus preserving intact the position of the military. In Egypt the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces seized power, although it kept discreetly to the background for more than a year, allowing elections to take place and even seeming to accept the election of a Muslim Brother as president. But when President Mohammed Morsi dared to challenge the military, naïvely believing that the elections gave him legitimacy and power, the military organized a coup d'état against him under the guise of responding to civilian demand for his ouster.¹¹ In Algeria, too, the military that had backed Bouteflika through four successive terms decided that his continued presence was creating problems and that it was time for him to resign in order to safeguard its own position.¹²

¹⁰ See Marwan Muasher and Marina Ottaway, "Arab Monarchies: Chance for Reform, Yet Unmet," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 2011.

¹¹ See Shadi Hamid, "The Tragedy of Egypt's Mohammed Morsi," *Brookings Institution*, June 2019. www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/06/19/the-tragedy-of-egypts-mohamed-morsi/ accessed March 3, 2022. For more detail, see David Ottaway and Marina Ottaway, *A Tale of Four Worlds: The Arab Region after the Uprisings* (London: Hurst Publishers 2019).

¹² Sharan Grewal, "Why the Algeria Army Abandoned Bouteflika," *Brookings Institution*, April 10, 2019. www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/04/10/why-algerian-army-abandoned-outeflika/ accessed February 11, 2022.

In both countries, by refusing to support a president that had become a liability, the military preserved its power. In Egypt the power grab was explicit, a coup that put Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in power, followed by his election as a “civilian” president in 2014. In Algeria the military’s role remained more covert, as it had always been, but there is no doubt that it ensured the election of Abdelmadjid Tebboune, a member of the old establishment, and retained a powerful voice in determining his policies afterward.

The stability of the military regimes offers an interesting analogy to the stability of the monarchical systems. In both types, there is a clear distinction between *le gouvernement*, which can be extremely unstable—for example, Jordan has had seven prime ministers since 2011—and *le pouvoir*, which is vested in an institution, the military or the monarchy, that transcends specific individuals, creating the possibility of sacrificing the individual and saving the institution. In a well-functioning democracy, the same stabilizing function is performed by the separation of the institution—say, the presidency—from the incumbent of the moment. For example, in August 1974 US President Richard Nixon resigned without endangering the office of the president.

Republics where real power does not reside in the military but is in the hands of an individual are more vulnerable to instability. In Tunisia, where the military was kept weak and apolitical after independence and civilian institutions were subordinate to the president, there was nothing to ensure regime stability once President Zine al Abidine Ben Ali had fled to Saudi Arabia as protesters thronged the streets of the capital. Ben Ali’s departure triggered regime change, requiring a long process of bargaining and negotiating before a new regime came into existence. The new regime was hailed, correctly, as the most democratic in the Arab world, but it is also proving unstable.

With the exception of Sudan, other republics where the military was not dominant have not been so fortunate, because the vacuum of power left by a leader forced out of office was quickly filled by rival armed groups, none of which could impose itself. The result was continuing warfare in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and to a lesser extent Iraq, although in the latter two countries outside support eventually stabilized the situation. I will return to the case of Sudan later.

FITTING POLITICAL PARTIES INTO ARAB POLITICAL SYSTEMS

Political parties exist in all Arab countries, no matter their political system, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE—the slight political openings in the latter two countries might lead to the emergence of parties there as well. The fact that parties exist does not mean that they operate freely and independently of the incumbent government. Nor does it mean that in all countries they represent constituencies.

Parties in republican systems present the most complex picture. First of all, even in republics that have reintroduced multi-party systems, the legacy of the single-party system survives in the form of a government party with power that is not derived only by the votes it receives but also by its proximity to *le pouvoir*. In other words, such parties do not generate power democratically so much as they benefit from undemocratic sources of power in the system.

In Egypt before the 2011 uprising, the National Democratic Party dominated the scene, making it impossible for other organizations to compete. The party was set up by President Anwar Sadat when he reintroduced the multi-party system in 1978, stipulating that there

should be three parties: the NDP in the center and one each on the right and left. The number of parties increased in the following years, but the NDP maintained its position as the center of power. Parties that wanted seats in parliament could not just present candidates for elections, but had to negotiate with the authorities and the NDP about the number of seats they would be allowed to win—the regime wanted to create the illusion of a competitive system without incurring risks. Aspiring candidates that failed to get on the NDP electoral list would often run as independent and immediately rejoin the NDP if elected.

Tunisian politics was equally dominated by one party, the RCD (*Ressemblant Constitutionnel Democratique*), the successor to President Bourguiba's Neo Destour Party. The empty hulk of the RCD headquarters loomed over downtown Tunis for years after the uprising, a sinister reminder of the power structure of old, before the government dared to move some ministerial offices to the building. No party was allowed to compete freely with the RCD, which had the full weight of government authority behind it. Any party that showed signs of gaining popular support was quickly suppressed. This happened most notably to Ennahda, an Islamist party formed in 1981 under the name "Movement of Islamic Tendency," which rapidly gained popularity. As a result, in 1989 the party was not allowed to participate in the parliamentary elections, although some of its members were allowed to run as independents. Despite voting irregularities, Ennahda candidates garnered an estimated 7–10 percent of the vote. It was hardly a landslide, but was nevertheless enough to alarm President Ben Ali into arresting its top leaders or forcing them into exile. The party stopped functioning overtly but it remained alive behind the scenes, and won the plurality of the vote in 2011 after it was legalized again.

In some countries, dominant, government-affiliated parties survived the uprisings; for example, the General People's Congress in Yemen. But even when the old dominant parties did not survive, as in Tunisia and Morocco, the idea that in order to gain power and influence aspiring politicians needed to cling closely to the government's shirt-tails remained strong. In fact, even if leaders did not try to launch a new government party, politicians trying to curry favor with the leaders did it for them. In Egypt, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi did not launch a party. On the contrary, the new election law regulating the 2014 election restricted the role of all political parties, stipulating that only 120 seats, divided among four special electoral districts, would be filled on the basis of party lists, while 448 would be reserved for independents. Four party coalitions formed to compete for the party seats, but only one, For the Love of Egypt, was able to field a list in each of the four electoral districts. One member of that coalition was the Nation's Future Party, which soon established itself as the emerging government party. When new elections were held five years later, the election list was changed and parties could compete for half the seats, with the rest reserved for independents. The Nation's Future Party won 315 of the total number of seats, with its members competing on the party's list or as independents. Less than ten years after the disbanding of the NDP, another dominant government party had emerged in Egypt.

No dominant party has re-emerged in Tunisia since the disbanding of the RCD. Nevertheless, the party system in Tunisia is not a healthy one that gives confidence in its democratic system. Tunisia weathered the transition from Ben Ali's authoritarianism successfully because no party was in a position to dominate the transition. Ennahda received only a 30 percent plurality of the vote, and this helped to assuage secular Tunisians' anxiety that Islamists would come to rule the country and impose their values on it. The political spectrum suffered from the typical Arab plethora of small and by definition ineffective secular parties, but strong civil society organizations, particularly the labor unions, provided a counterbalance to Ennahda and did not

allow it to become dominant. In this pluralistic scene, it was difficult for a new dominant party to emerge. A veteran politician from the earliest days of independence, Beji Caid Essebsi, tried to stand up a broad umbrella secular party, Nida Tounes, hoping it would become that dominant party. Essebsi was elected president, but Nida Tounes did not have enough votes in parliament to form the government without the participation of Ennahda—in the Tunisian political system the cabinet is responsible to the parliament, not the president. Nida Tounes soon disintegrated into rival factions and Essebsi's aspiration to form a new dominant party died with it. Furthermore, the political spectrum remained too fragmented for any secular party to be effective, reviving the fear of Ennahda. In 2019, Kais Saied, a university professor with no party affiliation, was elected president; he disbanded the parliament, sidelined political parties and civil society organizations, and announced that he wanted a new constitution that would give him more power. The unfolding scenario points to the probable emergence of a system with an all-powerful president, possibly supported by a government party, as was the case before 2011. Independent political parties appear to have a dim future in Tunisia, barring another uprising.

Other Arab republics also struggle to overcome the legacy of the single-party system. In Syria, the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Asad came close to losing control of the country to radical Islamist groups after the 2011 uprising, but managed to survive with Russian support. The Ba'ath party has remained dominant, although some smaller parties aligned with it take part in elections in order to provide the illusion of competition. In Algeria a popular movement, the Hirak, fought a valiant struggle in 2019 and forced the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, but failed to generate enough power to also remove from power the old politico-military establishment. The president elected in December 2019, Abdelmajdid Tebboune, was part of the old establishment. And after the 2021 parliamentary elections the parliament was still dominated by the Front of National Liberation, which dates back more than half a century to the war of independence against France, together with the Rassemblement National Democratique (RND), a more recent creation of the same political and military establishment, and the Mouvement of Society for Peace, an Islamist party that has been in government for much of the past decade without having any real power. This was the same alignment of political parties that had dominated before the rise of the Hirak and the elections.¹³

Political parties in the Arab world, be it in monarchical or republican systems, have been ineffective in creating channels for effective popular participation. The regimes' unwillingness to share power is a fact, but parties also bear some of the responsibility, in particular secular parties. Most have not invested in forging organizations with strong ties to constituencies that share goals and values.

The exception is Islamist parties, which in all countries have invested and continue to invest heavily in organizing. Like the European Social Democratic parties of old, they have a strong political organization but also provide services to their constituents, including in health and education. On election day, they work to get out the vote—during the 2012 Egyptian elections, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party deployed in the streets of Cairo scores of computer-armed young people eager to help confused citizens find out where they were supposed to vote. Islamist parties—as this writer discovered the hard way,

¹³ Zine Labidine Ghebouli, "Algeria's Opposition after the Hirak: Limitations and Divisions," *Middle East Institute*, February 22, 2022. www.mei.edu/publications/algerias-opposition-after-hirak-limitations-and-divisions accessed March 4, 2022.

getting lost in out-of-the-way places on the way to appointments—usually have their offices in downscale residential areas rather than in the downtown business areas favored by secular parties. Because they have a membership and party structures, they usually hold internal elections, something secular parties are not inclined to do. To be sure, Islamist parties are not free of factions, internal squabbles over power, and probably, at times, corruption. Despite their flaws, they are real organizations, not hollow shells.

Even some well-established secular parties fail to build party structures. In the run-up to the 2012 elections in Egypt, the Wafd party argued that elections had been scheduled prematurely and that they did not have sufficient time to organize. The Wafd party was first formed in 1918 as a delegation of Egyptian nationalists demanding representation at the Paris peace conference at the end of World War I. It was the dominant party in Egypt for three decades before the 1952 Nasser coup d'état. Like all parties, it was then forced to disband by Nasser, but it was relaunched in the 1980s and has participated in every election since. In 2012, it only received 9 percent of the vote—but lack of time to organize was clearly not the issue. Nor was the Wafd unique among Egyptian secular parties in this respect: election observers from the United States assigned to monitor the vote in Upper Egypt in 2012 reported that in the course of their visit they had seen many offices of the PJD and AnNour, the Salafi Party, but not a single office of any other party.¹⁴

It is difficult to provide a firm, evidence-based explanation of why Arab secular parties are poor organizers, but anecdotal evidence is abundant. For example, a leader of one such party told this writer that his party was not holding campaign rallies because prospective voters would ask what the party would do for them—this would appear to be an eminently reasonable question on the part of citizens trying to decide for whom to cast their votes.¹⁵ Also telling is the large number of newspaper op-eds by party leaders battling for support, placed in the pages of newspapers most people do not read.

As a result, Islamist parties are better placed to compete in elections than are secular ones. When Algeria opened the door to multi-party elections for the first time in 1989, the Front Islamique de Salut (FIS) swept the vote in the local and provincial elections; it was about to do the same in the parliamentary elections of 1991–2 when the military seized power and cancelled the elections, leading to ten years of conflict. When elections resumed after the war, Islamist parties again proved the most viable, after the government parties.¹⁶ In the first elections after the uprisings, Islamists got a majority or plurality of votes in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, leading to the expectation that they would dominate everywhere. Their opponents derided their success as the result of their being an “organized minority,” implying they had no real support. Yet, the success of Islamists sapped the confidence of the secular parties, which in many cases decided to cooperate with *le pouvoir* in containing them. Secular parties in Egypt did not object to the military intervention of 2013 which eliminated the Muslim Brotherhood as a political force. In Tunisia, in 2014 secularists rallied behind Beji Caid Essebsi, a remnant of the old authoritarian Tunisia, to stem the rise of Ennahda. They only partly succeeded and were forced to share power with the Islamists, particularly as the secular alliance started to

¹⁴ Personal communication with observers, March 2012.

¹⁵ Personal Communication with a WAFD candidate, June 2014.

¹⁶ The Movement of Society for Peace, the major legal Islamist party, came in second place in the 1997 parliamentary elections, held even as the war between the government and radical Islamists was still raging. In the 2002 elections it won fourth place.

disintegrate almost immediately. Kais Saied, the winner of the 2019 presidential elections and one of 20 candidates, did not even belong to a party. And when he subsequently dismissed the parliament, the reaction was muted, and the public was divided and passive. The will for collective action that allowed the transition after 2011 had apparently dissipated, with the organizations supposed to channel public sentiment into effective political action seemingly at a loss. As a result, the road to a new authoritarianism seemed wide open.¹⁷

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE PROBLEM OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Since 2011, citizens in all Arab countries outside the Gulf have repeatedly taken to the streets in explosions of collective anger and manifestations of desire for change. Popular anger has led to collective action in the form of protests and demonstrations, often massive as well as prolonged. However, protesters have failed to convert angry outbursts into constant, routine participation in the political system. Collective action did not become routinized; but it is such routinized popular participation, not sporadic outbursts, that makes a democracy.

Until 2021, when Tunisian President Kais Saied disbanded the parliament, sweeping aside popular participation and political parties alike, most analysts of the Arab uprisings argued that Tunisia had succeeded in transforming the initial angry outbursts into legal political participation routinized through political parties and elections; in other words, becoming democratic. Such assessments always came with caveats about it still being early days, but the country appearing to be moving in the right direction. Few would reach that conclusion now, after President Saied suspended the parliament and made it clear that he wants a new constitution that returns power to the president.

The experience of Sudan illustrates the difficulty of a transition from outbursts of anger to regular collective action. Sudan was essentially untouched by unrest in 2011 when the rest of the region exploded, and citizens only revolted openly from 2018 onwards. By then, they had learned a great deal from the uprisings in other countries. They were less naïve about the difficulties they faced and harbored no illusion that a short period of intense protest would succeed in undermining a well-entrenched regime. They were also more tactical in how they organized their protest and how they dealt with the authorities. And yet they failed.

The country appeared better situated than most for success. First, while it had been controlled for long periods of time by authoritarian government, most recently after 2013, it had also experienced intermittent periods of relatively democratic rule. In 1964 the military government of Ibrahim Abboud was brought down by civil society protests spearheaded by professional associations and intellectuals. Abboud's successor, Jaafar al-Nimeiri, ruled for the next two decades, at first with the acceptance of the population. But in the early 1980s he turned to Islam and imposed sharia law on the country, leading to widespread protest by the same groups that had mobilized in 1968. In April 1985, after months of protest, Nimeiri was deposed by the military. Elections held a few months later brought to power an alliance of the old parties affiliated to religious brotherhoods that had dominated Sudanese civilian politics

¹⁷ Vivien Lee, "Tunisian President Promises Vote on Constitution and Sets Election Date." *New York Times*, December 13, 2021. www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/world/middleeast/tunisia-saied-constitution-election.html accessed March 4, 2022.

since independence. These parties could not govern effectively and in 1989 the civilian prime minister was deposed in yet another coup d'état, which led to an uneasy alliance between the military, led by Omar al-Bashir, and the more radical of the Islamist parties, led by Hassan Turabi. There followed a deeply troubled period during which Sudan experienced war in Darfur and in the south and lost control of the southern part of the country, which became the Republic of South Sudan in 2011. The final outcome of the period of instability and strife was the 2018 uprising and the deposition of Omar Bashir in 2019. But unrest continued and the Transitional Military Council (TMC) that governed after the overthrow of Nimeiry eventually entered into negotiations with the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), an alliance of civilian organizations in which professional associations played a central role. In no other uprising had protesters managed to organize themselves into a coherent organization and enter into negotiations.

After several months of talks, in July 2019 the TMC and the FFC announced a transition agreement. In a nutshell, the two sides agreed to the formation of a civil–military Sovereignty Council, to be headed for 21 months by a military representative and for the following 18 by a civilian. The Sovereignty Council in turn supervised the formation of a cabinet headed by a civilian. The end point of the process would be elections, held at the end of the 39 months of transition.

It was a fragile edifice, and it was clear from the beginning that a crisis was likely to explode when the military was expected to cede control of the Sovereignty Council to a civilian. And this is what happened. In October 2021, just before civilians were supposed to get control of the Sovereignty Council, the military declared itself in charge, arrested the civilian prime minister, and deposed him from his post. A series of massive demonstrations similar to those which shook the country in 2019 forced the military to relent somewhat, releasing the prime minister and declaring that he could remain in office, although it was clear that he had even less power than before. The situation remained stalemated. The military had made their point: that ultimately, they were in control. Civilians had also made theirs: that they would not accept military rule, and still controlled the streets. Despite all the efforts made, the Sudanese had not succeeded in routinizing popular participation though a legitimate political process. Indeed, popular participation suffered another serious blow when war erupted between two military factions in April 2023.

CONCLUSIONS

Democracy requires individual freedom so that citizens can make their own political choices, but it also requires collective action to transform individual choices into control over the government. And that collective action must be regular and routinized—sequential uprisings do not constitute democracy. The key to such routinized collective action is political parties.

The Arab world does not currently possess many political parties capable of transforming individual choices into effective political action. A great number of parties, most probably the numerical majority, are instruments for the advancement of personal careers rather than for mustering collective action. The main exception is Islamist parties, which are more likely to have organized constituencies. The cause of the weakness of political parties rests in part with their leaders, but it also rests with the governing elites that deliberately discourage collective action.

The importance of political parties has been recognized by organizations that seek to promote democracy. International democracy-promoting non-governmental organizations have invested considerable money and effort into programs to strengthen Middle East political parties, trying to teach them the fundamentals of writing party platforms, publicizing them, and getting out the vote. The problem is that in the context of Arab authoritarian regimes, strengthening political parties is not a technical exercise or about building a political platform, but is rather a confrontation with authorities that want to repress collective action.

The decades since the beginning of the Arab uprisings have shown that when citizens are upset, collective action is inevitable. Governments are unable to suppress completely the outbursts of anger manifested in street movements. They are much better adept at stymieing longer-term efforts to routinize participation through a regular political process. But only routinized participation, in which political parties play a central role, provides the foundation of democratic systems. Arab countries are caught in a vicious circle from which they find it difficult to extricate themselves. Their political parties are weak because their political systems are not democratic, but the weakness of the political parties makes it difficult for democracy to establish itself.

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6. Far-right populists in power and transnational repression of dissidents

Ihsan Yilmaz

INTRODUCTION

Populism is a set of ideas that ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’.¹ At the same time, populism often contains a second cultural dimension, in which the ‘pure people’ are separated from ‘others’ within the same society who, due to their ethnicity, religion, ideology or culture, allegedly threaten the ‘pure people’ and their way of life.² In other words, populism is a ‘thin’ ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice.³ All in all, populism consists of four elements: popular sovereignty, pure people, a corrupt elite and dangerous others. While populists construct these antagonistic binaries, populist leaders portray themselves as saviours of ‘the people’ and their sovereignty: as defenders of the victimised little people against the corrupt elite and dangerous others living in the country. This is an attempt to turn politics into an existential struggle and zero-sum game between friends and enemies or the forces of good and evil, where good is represented by the populists who are the only legitimate representatives of the people.

Populists in power grow authoritarian over time.⁴ Authoritarian leaders are required to create social acceptance of their policies as a matter of survival, as their source of legitimacy, especially in electoral authoritarian settings. Addressing this emerging ‘need’, an alliance almost inevitably emerges between authoritarianism and populism. Authoritarian populists construct their others as existential threats to the people’s (nation’s) survival. This discursive act is called securitisation.

In the Turkish case, the fear that Turkey would be divided by the Great Powers along ethnic, religious or cultural lines, similar to the fate of the Ottoman Empire, has been at the centre of the Turkish ruling elite’s authoritarian homogenising nation-building policies and its securitisation of minority identities and groups. The insecurities, fears, anxieties, siege mentality and a sense of victimhood at the hands of the Western powers that informed the nation-building

¹ Cas Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, *Government and Opposition* 39 (2004): 543.

² Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘Political Science Confronts Populism’, *Telos* 103 (1995): 9–43.

³ Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, *Twenty-First Century Populism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁴ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

policies at the birth of the Turkish Republic in 1923 have also been sources of different manifestations of populism in the country.⁵

Turkey's domestic collaborators or internal enemies are defined widely as any group not among the designated desired citizens.⁶ Thus, they could be non-Muslim minorities, Kurdish political movement members or heterodox Muslims such as Alevis or, more recently, Gülenists. Just after its establishment in 2001, Turkey's ruling party for the past two decades – the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party), led by the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – promised to break this vicious cycle by undertaking pro-EU and pro-pluralist democratising reforms that would desecuritise ethnic, religious, cultural and political minorities such as non-Muslims, Alevis, Kurds, Islamists and Gülenists.⁷ However, once it had consolidated its power, the AKP gradually transformed itself into a populist authoritarian party. This has resulted in the loss of its pro-EU, pro-democracy support from groups such as liberals and Gülenists. The party decided to compensate for this by establishing a de facto alliance with the far-right Turkish nationalist and nativist MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, Nationalist Action Party) that intensified its populism and authoritarianism.

Since at least the Gezi Protests of mid-2013, the AKP has rallied its supporters around the narrative of an imminent danger to national security. During the referendum campaign in 2017, Erdoğan and his new ally Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), portrayed all those opposed to the proposed political system change as traitors and collaborators of the coupists.⁸ According to this view, Turkey is divided into two: the patriotic natives and the traitors. The AKP–MHP regime has successfully claimed that its critics and opposition groups are existential threats to the country and the nation, and that Erdoğan is the only credible leader who can challenge these threats. In this authoritarian populist mentality, 'the people' (or 'the nation') is defined more by who is excluded from it: non-Muslims, Alevis, disloyal Kurds, leftists, liberals, Academics for Peace, pro-EU groups, disloyal Islamists, Gülenists and the like, all of whom are cast as traitors and pawns of conspiring Western powers and the Jewish lobby who do not want Turkey and its leader Erdoğan to lead the Muslim world against the oppression of imperialists.⁹

These dissident and minority groups and their members are not repressed only in Turkey. Their extensions in diaspora are also targeted by the AKP–MHP regime through the long arm of Turkey that pits pro-regime Turkish emigrants against the others. In many cases, this has

⁵ For the role of emotions in the Turkish nation-building, see now in detail, Ihsan Yilmaz, *Creating the Desired Citizens: State, Islam and Ideology in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); and Ihsan Yilmaz and E. Shipoli, 'Use of Past Collective Traumas, Fear and Conspiracy Theories for Securitisation and Repression of the Opposition: The Turkish Case', *Democratization* 29:2 (2021): 320–36.

⁶ Ihsan Yilmaz and James Barry, 'The AKP's De-securitization and Resecuritization of a Minority Community: The Alevi Opening and Closing', *Turkish Studies* 21:2 (2020): 231–53.

⁷ Yilmaz and Shipoli, 'Use of Past Collective Traumas'; Ihsan Yilmaz, M. Demir and E. Shipoli, 'Securitisation via Functional Actors and Authoritarian Resilience: Collapse of the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 57:1 (2021): 1–16; Ihsan Yilmaz, E. Shipoli and M. Demir, 'Authoritarian Resilience through Securitisation: An Islamist Populist Party's Co-optation of A Secularist Far-Right Party', *Democratization* 28:6 (2021): 1115–32.

⁸ Yilmaz, Shipoli and Demir, 'Authoritarian Resilience through Securitisation'; Yilmaz, Demir, and Shipoli, 'Securitisation via Functional Actors'.

⁹ Zeynep Gülsah Çapan and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Turkey's Ambivalent Self: Ontological Insecurity in "Kemalism" versus "Erdoğanism"', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32:3 (2019): 276.

resulted in physically violent attacks against these groups. This chapter provides a brief overview of these developments. After summarising the gradual authoritarianisation of the AKP, it looks at the emergence of the authoritarian alliance of the Turkish nationalist and nativist populists (MHP) and Islamist populists (AKP). It then elaborates on their populist narrative and their framing of dissident and minority groups as designated existentially dangerous others. Before concluding, the chapter looks in some detail at how the regime targets the extensions of these dissidents and minorities in diaspora, especially in democratic countries of the Global North, from the USA to Australia. It shows, with concrete examples, how the regime has successfully mobilised and encouraged its supporters in diaspora, who include not only people originating from Turkey but also those from the Sunni Muslim world, against the dissident and minority migrant groups.

GRADUAL AUTHORITARIANISATION OF THE AKP

The 28 February 1997 coup that toppled the Islamist and centre-right coalition led by the Islamist Welfare Party's leader Necmettin Erbakan was traumatic for the Turkish Islamists. For a few years they were subjected to verbal abuse, hate crime, demonisation and securitisation on a daily basis on mainstream pro-secular and pro-Kemalist TV and in the daily newspapers. Erdoğan, mayor of Istanbul at that time, was sentenced to prison for reading an emotional militarist poem.

Having concluded that the Kemalist establishment led by the military would never allow an Islamist government to rule the country, younger generation Islamists decided to give up their Islamist ideology and narratives. When the Islamists established a new political party (Virtue), the reformist younger wing of Virtue, under Erdoğan's de facto leadership, argued that Erbakan's Islamism had reached an impasse and that they had to be pro-pluralism and not anti-Western. The Constitutional Court shut down the Virtue Party on 22 June 2001 on the grounds that it was an extension of the Islamist Welfare Party. Following this, Erdoğan and friends agreed that they would not join Erbakan's new Islamist party, the Felicity Party. They merged with other politicians from the centre-right to establish the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) on 14 August 2001, declaring the party's ideology to be conservative democratic, pro-Western, pro-European Union, pro-secularism and definitely not Islamist.¹⁰

The party came to power with the November 2002 elections and pursued a pro-EU agenda, replacing many authoritarian laws with democratic ones. When the secular and pro-military president Ahmet Necdet Sezer's term ended, the AKP nominated one of its own: Abdullah Gül, who had been an Islamist for decades and who serves as prime minister and foreign minister in the AKP governments. However, the Kemalist sections, especially the military, staunchly objected to his election. Army General Staff made a threatening statement (the so-called e-memorandum) on 27 April 2007. As a result, in a very controversial judgment, the Constitutional Court cancelled the first round of presidential elections that took place in the parliament. This consolidated the pro-EU coalition between the AKP, liberals, Gülenists and democrats. The AKP reacted furiously to the military's e-intervention and called for early

¹⁰ Ihsan Yilmaz, 'Muslim Democrats in Turkey and Egypt: Participatory Politics as a Catalyst', *Insight Turkey* 11:2 (April 2009): 93–112.

elections, increasing its vote share from 34 per cent in 2002 to almost 47 per cent in 2007 and getting almost two-thirds of the seats. In a referendum, the Constitution was changed so that instead of parliament, which was open to military pressure, the people would directly elect the president. In the following presidential elections Abdullah Gül was elected as president. With this, the AKP had an opportunity to gradually appoint pro-AKP judges to supreme courts, such as the Constitutional Court, that were the bastions and fortresses of the Kemalist establishment. To curb the Kemalists' de facto power over bureaucracy, the AKP, liberals, Gülenists and democrats wholeheartedly endorsed the constitutional referendum in 2010. The referendum terminated the Kemalist hegemony within the judiciary and limited the military's influence on politics. However, in contrary to the expectations of many, it did not bring more democracy, but weakened checks on Erdoğan's power and created another non-democratic power centre within the bureaucracy controlled by the Erdoğanist–Gülenist alliance.

After winning 50 per cent of the vote in the 2011 election, the AKP's authoritarian turn became very visible. Erdoğan began to react to political challenges in a growingly demagogic and autocratic manner. Secular sections of society felt pressured by the AKP, and they were also uncomfortable with the AKP's neo-patrimonial corrupt policies that aimed at enriching Erdoğan's cronies. In mid-2013, when Erdoğan insisted on destroying a leafy historical park (Gezi Park, near Taksim Square) and felling its trees in a secular section of Istanbul so that his cronies could build a multi-billion USD shopping centre, some young people tried to protect the trees, but Erdoğan ordered the police to react with physical violence, leading to the hospitalisation of some protesters. This triggered hundreds and thousands of people to pour into the streets and squares to protest for days. Erdoğan did not give up and the police continued to attack the peaceful protesters. Several people died and many were injured. Despite warnings from his colleagues in the AKP, during the crisis he doubled down on his anti-protester rhetoric and claimed that they were pawns of the West, conspiring against his party. After these events, the AKP and its media took an authoritarian populist turn and explained away all policy failures as the result of conspiracies between the West and its traitor pawns in the country. Erdoğan eliminated colleagues who had disagreed with him during the Gezi Protests and transformed the AKP into a one-man party.¹¹

As a result of the Gezi Protests, liberals and leftists broke away from the tacit pro-EU coalition. At the end of that same year, after a corruption scandal, the Gülenists left the coalition. On 17 December 2013 a major corruption scandal rocked the Erdoğan government. Erdoğan dismissed the charges and blamed the Gülen Movement for organising a 'coup' against him. Similar to the Gezi protesters, the movement and the prosecutors were framed as pawns of the conspiring Western powers that were trying to prevent Erdoğan leading the Muslim world against Western imperialist oppression. He justified his unconstitutional move to reassign hundreds of police chiefs and fire the lead prosecutor in the corruption investigation with these conspiracy theories. This was followed by an anti-Gülenist purge and witch-hunt. The Gülen Movement's private schools, organizations, newspapers, and TV stations were raided and closed. Private businesses that refused to work with Erdoğan and whose owners were in any way affiliated with the movement were closed or taken over by boards of trustees composed of Erdoğan loyalists. Journalists that reported on the corruption were imprisoned. All of this was

¹¹ Ihsan Yilmaz and G. Bashirov, 'The AKP after 15 Years: Emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey', *Third World Quarterly* 39:9 (2018): 1812–30.

done through executive decisions that were against the Constitution, and without any court decisions.

ALLIANCE OF THE TURKISH NATIONALIST (MHP) AND ISLAMIST (AKP) POPULISTS

The MHP is the biggest far-right Turkish nationalist party. Its ideology comprises Turkish nationalism, nativism, populism, Kemalism, militarism, mono-culturalism, authoritarianism, anti-communism and Islamic moralism. It has been a coalition partner several times, in both right-wing and left-wing-led parties, since the early 1970s. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it can be said that the Kurdish issue is the only one that mobilises and energises the grassroots of the MHP. When the AKP tried to solve the Kurdish problem in its pro-EU period by widening the political space for the Kurdish issue, granting Kurds some limited cultural and linguistic freedoms, the MHP vehemently opposed these policies or promises.

When the pro-Kurdish HDP (*Halkların Demokrasi Partisi*, Peoples' Democratic Party) did not conform to the wishes of Erdoğan and participated in the 2015 general elections as a party, instead of nominating independent candidates as it had done in the past to bypass the 10 per cent threshold, the AKP was unable to win enough seats to form the government by itself and change the political system. Erdoğan had assumed the HDP would not pass the 10 per cent threshold, but in fact it was very successful. Many Kurds, even those who had voted for Erdoğan in previous elections, voted for the HDP, enabling the HDP to get 80 staunchly pro-Kurdish legislators and costing the AKP its majority in the parliament for the first time since 2002. Moreover, the HDP did not support Erdoğan's plans for an *a la Turca* authoritarian presidential system. All these made the HDP an enemy of Erdoğan, who decided to present the party as a terrorist organisation and compensate for his electoral losses with the far-right Turkish nationalist votes of the MHP.¹² Erdoğan declared the HDP terrorists; hundreds of HDP members were arrested due to so-called links with terrorist groups, and Kurdish provinces were destroyed as a result of conflicts between the state and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).¹³

Normally, it would have been expected that the AKP would form a coalition government after the June 2015 elections. But at the time the MHP was still anti-AKP because of its past pro-Kurdish policies, so Erdoğan decided to renew the elections in November. Between June and November, military operations were launched in Kurdish-dominated cities in Turkey's southeast. Erdoğan made use of politics of fear and convinced some voters that without a strong one-party government chaos and terror prevail, arguing that the reason military operations were being undertaken was because the pro-Kurdish, outlawed PKK was engaging in terror given the lack of a strong one-party government. As a result, the AKP increased its votes by about 10 per cent and became the majority party again in the November elections.

After the loss of the June elections, Erdoğan was simply using the MHP's usual talking points. To co-opt the MHP, Erdoğan had to convince it that he shared the same securitisation understanding of the Kurdish issue. Even though the co-optation of the MHP was a complex process that included giving material concessions to the MHP, favouring the MHP's support-

¹² Yilmaz, Shipoli and Demir, 'Authoritarian Resilience through Securitisation'.

¹³ Yilmaz, Demir and Shipoli, 'Securitisation via Functional Actors.'

ers in state employment, co-operating with pro-MHP bureaucrats within the important state organs and favouring pro-MHP businesses in public tenders, the AKP's re-securitisation of the HDP and the Kurdish issue was the single most important one, without which any rapprochement between the AKP and the MHP would not be possible. The MHP was not pleased with the Gülen Movement either. AKP's distancing itself from the movement and then later declaring it a terrorist organisation, coupled with its parroting the MHP's narrative on the Kurdish issue, melted the ice between the Islamist populist AKP and the nationalist populist MHP.

The mysterious coup attempt of 15 July 2016 was a turning point in Turkey's history. Erdoğan called it 'a gift from God'. As time has gone on, more unanswered questions have been revealed and new findings do not match the narrative from Erdoğan and the AKP about what happened before, during and after that night. However, the 'gift from God' justified more oppression in the eyes of the supporters of the AKP and its de facto coalition partner the MHP. During this period, Erdoğan eliminated the Gülen Movement and crippled the pro-Kurdish opposition. Liberals were also eliminated or silenced. The AKP–MHP coalition dominated media and civil society through politics of fear.

This coalition was the driving force behind Erdoğan's win in the 2017 referendum, albeit with only a slight margin (51.41 per cent). During the referendum campaign, Erdoğan and his new ally Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of MHP, portrayed all those against the political system change as traitors and collaborators with the coupists. In this authoritarian populist framing, Turkey was divided into two: the patriotic natives and the traitors who were citizens of Turkey but were under the control of conspiring Western powers. On 24 June 2018, Erdoğan was re-selected as president with 52.39 per cent of the votes. This referendum in 2017 and the presidential election in 2018 allowed for the parliamentary system to fall within the presidential one, making Erdoğan not only de facto but also de jure populist dictator. He now has full de jure control over the judiciary, having appointed many Constitutional Court members directly, and other supreme courts' judges indirectly through his loyalists. He can now rule by decree and without credible parliamentary supervision.

The MHP supported constitutional changes and the creation of the authoritarian presidential system in 2017, the re-election of Erdoğan as president in 2018 with new authoritarian powers, and his crackdown on the Kurdish political movement, liberals, political rivals, and Gülenists. Oppression of all these dissident minority groups and a shared anti-Western Islamist-cum-Turkish nationalist populist narrative have enabled the stability of the AKP–MHP de facto coalition so far.

POPULISM OF THE AKP–MHP REGIME

Since the coup attempt, a new nationalistic populist narrative about the victory of national will, resembling the victory of the War of Independence (1919–22), has been created and propagated by the AKP–MHP coalition. According to that narrative, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) was the founding father of the country after the first War of Independence, but Erdoğan is the father of 'New Turkey'.¹⁴ In this narrative, he is also constructed as the leader

¹⁴ Ihsan Yilmaz, M.E. Caman and G. Bashirov, 'How an Islamist Party Managed to Legitimate Its Authoritarianisation in the Eyes of the Secularist Opposition: The Case of Turkey', *Democratization* 27:2 (2020): 265–82.

and hope of the ummah (Muslim world). His supporters in the media, social media, TV dramas and movies compare him to the pan-Islamist Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Abdulhamid II. In this narrative, conspiring enemies are made up of everyone from Zionists to international bankers, interest (Jewish) lobbies, Islamophobes, the CIA, the American ambassador, CNN, Twitter, secularists, leftists, Kurds, Alevis and Gülenists.

Anti-Western populism is shared by many political parties in Turkey, including the AKP and MHP. This has roots in the Ottoman Empire days, and especially in the defeat and collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the hands of the Western powers.¹⁵ The Turkish national psyche suffers humiliation, a inferiority complex and antagonism vis-à-vis the West. Humiliation or disregard by significant others destabilises a state's self-image as states seek to compensate their self-esteem with self-assertion and/or devaluation and aggression toward the Other.¹⁶ Turkey's ontological insecurity is based on this national psychic wound that permeates the national curriculum and popular culture. The sense of never having aligned temporally with the West and always being behind in the process of modernisation, the image of backwardness and being seen as uncivilised, has deeply impacted the populist narratives in the country, regardless of the ideological background of the parties and individuals. This has been fortified by the deep suspicions of the Turkish elite about the West's true intentions towards Turkey. While this elite saw Western civilisation as the only civilisation to be emulated, they have experienced anxieties, insecurities and fears in relation to the true intentions of the powerful Western states.

Deeply rooted in this national psychic wound, the 'national will' rhetoric has been used intensely by almost all political parties in Turkey, but especially by the MHP and AKP. This populism is not only limited to positive emotions such as love of the homeland, desire for national glory and defiance against the foreign powers but also extends to antagonistic polarisation of the nation into 'us' and 'others'. Here 'others' includes not only the corrupt elite (every party sees the leaders of other parties as part of the corrupt elite and pawns of either sinister Western powers or fundamentalist Islamist forces), but also foreign powers and ordinary citizens belonging to ethnic, religious and ideological minorities. It is ironic that no single group comprises a majority in the country and almost every group is another group's dangerous other through a populist lens, resulting in the awkward anomaly of having almost 100 per cent of the population being one group's dangerous other. For example, for the secularist nationalist Kemalists, who make up about 30 per cent of the population, Islamists (30 per cent), Kurds (20 per cent) and non-Muslims (less than 1 per cent) are dangerous others, while for the Islamists, the Kemalists, Alevis (10 per cent) and non-Muslims are dangerous others.

The victimhood strategy taken up by the AKP government was initially limited to the Kemalist oppression, becoming the 'subject formation of Turkish-Islamist identity'.¹⁷ Since the Kemalists have been defeated, this type of victimhood is insufficiently mobilising for the AKP's electorate, so since the Gezi Protests Erdoğan has been instrumentalising victimhood rhetoric against the West. He has been arguing that Turkey and Muslim world in general are the victims at the hands of the West. Scapegoating and demonising the West is a key strategy

¹⁵ Çapan and Zarakol, 'Turkey's Ambivalent Self', 269.

¹⁶ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 218.

¹⁷ Zafer Yilmaz, 'The AKP and the Spirit of the "New" Turkey: Imagined Victim, Reactionary Mood, and Resentful Sovereign', *Turkish Studies* 18:3 (2017): 482.

that has worked in Turkish society. The instrumentalisation of anti-Western conspiracy theories and belief in them is part and parcel of Turkish political culture. In this context both the AKP and the MHP have been (independently of each other) claiming that they are the true and genuine representative of the national will and of the pure people. In this narrative, Erdoğan has been constructed as ‘a man of the people’, ‘lover of God’ and ‘light of hope for the millions’. Since Erdoğan embodies the nation and national will, any accusation against him is thus an assault against the nation.¹⁸

The 2016 coup attempt – his ‘gift from God’ – was a turning point for Erdoğan’s strategy of populism. Since then, the AKP–MHP regime has been effectively able to incite fear in the public by ‘otherising’ all potential opponents and groups perceived as ‘dangerous’, even if several of these do not actively oppose him. Their lack of staunch loyalty is reason enough to be treated as suspect. Non-Muslims; secular elites, with the exception of those that are pro-AKP and MHP; leftists; liberals; Alevis; disloyal Kurds; and disloyal Islamists have been depicted as the people’s dangerous others by the AKP–MHP regime.

THE PEOPLE’S OTHERS

The AKP–MHP regime claims to represent ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’; however, like all other right-wing populisms, this populism is not inclusive. The ‘national will’ (*milli irade*) in this populist narrative is limited to the Sunni Muslim Turkish nation. This excludes non-Muslims, most secularists, leftists, liberals, Alevis, most Kurds and some disloyal Islamists.

The percentage of the non-Muslim population in Turkey is very low. The US Department of State’s 2020 International Religious Freedom Report notes that the population of Turkey is approximately 82 million, of which 99.8 per cent identify as Muslim and only 0.2 per cent are non-Muslim.¹⁹ Despite these low numbers, they are still seen as a threat by many groups in Turkey, including the AKP–MHP regime. The rising populist authoritarianism of AKP–MHP has made non-Muslim minorities a target at both discursive and policy levels.²⁰ In the pro-regime narrative, Christian and Jewish minorities have been framed as collaborators with sinister Western foreign powers that aim to redesign Turkish politics and divide and rule Turkey. The use of anti-Semitic language is growing at an increasing rate, not only through the regime’s hateful anti-Western narrative but also through popular TV series.

The resentment and vindictiveness of Islamists and their far-right coalition partners towards the West extends to these secular elites, who are seen as products and pawns of the West. This dangerous other group includes most of the secular Turks, such as Kemalists, leftists, liberals, democrats and most urban educated people. These are often cast as elites (*Beyaz Türkler*, White Turks) that Erdoğanists accuse of being out of touch with the ‘real’, authentic values of ‘the people’.²¹ In this narrative, the White Turks are portrayed as responsible for anything that

¹⁸ Hakkı Taş, ‘Turkey – From Tutelary to Delegative Democracy’, *Third World Quarterly* 36:4 (2015): 785.

¹⁹ USCIRF, ‘Turkey’, *The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)*, 2021. www.uscirtf.gov/countries/turkey.

²⁰ Ramazan Kılınç, *Alien Citizens, The State and Religious Minorities in Turkey and France* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 183.

²¹ Çapan and Zarakol, ‘Turkey’s Ambivalent Self’, 276.

goes wrong in the country.²² As a result, enormous numbers of ordinary members of the public as well as opposition intellectuals, journalists, activists and politicians have been targeted by the politicised and pro-regime courts.

Alevi in Turkey are a non-Sunni Muslim community. They are the second largest religious group (about 7–10 per cent) in Turkey after Sunnis. Alevi have been stigmatised as descendants of the Ottoman Alevi and Bektashi who revolted against the Sultan and cooperated with Safavid Iran. Initially, the AKP adopted a friendly approach to Alevi during its brief pro-EU period. When the AKP realised that co-opting this group was not possible, it turned again to re-securitisation of the group and re-framed it as a dangerous other.²³ Especially after the outbreak of civil war in Syria, the AKP took a pro-Sunni adventurist foreign policy direction. The first anti-Alevi AKP sectarian discourse is ‘traced to the campaign speeches of the 2010 referendum, in which Erdoğan repeatedly complained of an alleged “domination of high judicial posts by a clique of Alevi”’.²⁴ During the Gezi Protests, Alevi neighbourhoods were targeted by the police violence and several Alevi died as a result of this violence.²⁵ On the night of the coup, pro-Erdoğanist crowds targeted these neighbourhoods once more.

Even though the AKP has been de-emphasising secular Turkish nationalism and promoting Islam, which would cement Turkish and Kurdish brotherhood,²⁶ it has not shown any substantive departure from the Turkish nationalist stance on the Kurdish issue. The AKP government took a number of historic steps, initiating reforms to address the problems faced by the Kurdish people in Turkey. After the AKP failed to co-opt the pro-Kurdish HDP, Kurdish language schools, magazines and TV stations were shut down by presidential decree. Thousands of HDP politicians, mayors, MPs and ordinary members of the public have been imprisoned and tortured for alleged terrorist leanings.

The AKP has been attacking as disloyal all opposition and non-abiding Islamic groups, but mainly the Gülen Movement followers, the Gülenists. The Gülen Movement has received the harshest treatment at the hands of the AKP, despite being an ally for most of AKP’s governance from 2004 to 2013. The AKP–MHP regime has portrayed the movement as a pawn of the US and the mastermind of all conspiracies against Turkey. More than half a million Turkish citizens have been investigated for belonging to what the regime called the ‘Fethullahist Terrorist Organization’ (FETO) and more than 50,000 have been imprisoned. Citizens have even been tortured and killed under the pretext that they were part of a conspiracy to overturn Erdoğan since the Gezi Protests, and especially in the military coup of 2016. The regime’s purges and witch-hunts have not been limited to the Gülen Movement. Another example is Furkan Vakfı. As an ultra-conservative group and a vocal critic of Erdoğan, Furkan Vakfı has also been targeted with police violence and imprisonment of its members. The Islamist human rights organisation *Mazlumder* became another obstacle to Erdoğan’s authoritarianism after it prepared a report criticizing Erdoğan’s policies on Kurds. In March 2017, Erdoğan’s secret

²² Yılmaz, ‘The AKP and the Spirit of the “New” Turkey’, 499.

²³ Yılmaz and Barry, ‘The AKP’s De-securitization’.

²⁴ Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, ‘AKP, Sectarianism, and the Alevi’s Struggle for Equal Rights in Turkey’, *National Identities* 20:1 (2018): 56.

²⁵ Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, ‘Alevizing Gezi’, *Jadalliya* 2014. www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/17087/alevizing-gezi.

²⁶ Gülay Türkmen, *Under the Banner of Islam: Turks, Kurds, and the Limits of Religious Unity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

hand intervened in *Mazlumder* and the organisation experienced a 'self-coup'.²⁷ When the former Islamist prime minister of the AKP, Ahmet Davutoğlu, announced the establishment of a new political party in December 2019, AKP's ally and coalition partner, Devlet Bahçeli of the MHP, claimed that the goal of the newly established political parties in the country was not to meet political and social need, but to conspire against the country. A private university in Istanbul (Şehir University), which was founded by an Islamist foundation led by Davutoğlu, found itself caught in the crossfire.²⁸ It was taken over by the AKP government, to be administered by the state-run Marmara University, but later was completely shut down.

The AKP–MHP regime's repression of dissidents is not limited to Turkey, as the regime has been transnationalising its authoritarian populist rhetoric and targeting dissidents in diaspora.

TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION OF THE PEOPLE'S OTHERS

The AKP–MHP regime has been aggressively using the transnational space to solidify support for it and to repress its opposition both domestically and transnationally.²⁹ To legitimise the repression of critics and otherised ethnic, religious and ideological emigrant groups living abroad but originating from Turkey, the regime frames them as co-conspirators of the usual enemy, that is, the West. Not only the official organs of the state, such as diplomatic missions and extensions of the state's security and intelligence, but also various formations under the guise of civil society organisations have been established by pro-regime members of diaspora and deployed as extensions and in the service of the authoritarian state at home.³⁰ To this end, Turkey has founded several 'civil society' organisations, such as the UID (Union of International Democrats; formerly known as the Union of European Turkish Democrats, UETD).³¹ These operate across Western countries through numerous branches and have organic ties to the Turkish state authorities.³² The German Office for the Protection of the Constitution declared in 2018 that it is monitoring the activities of the UID and described it as Turkish nationalist and incompatible with Germany's free democratic order.³³ The organisa-

²⁷ Umar Farooq, 'Erdogan's Authoritarian Style and Pragmatic Foreign Policy Turn Some Turkish Islamists Against Him', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 May 2017. www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-turkey-islamists-2017-story.html.

²⁸ Maaz Ibrahimoglu, 'A Conservative Tragedy Unfolding: Istanbul's Şehir University', *Ahval*, 26 November 2019. <https://ahvalnews.com/istanbul-sehir-university/conservative-tragedy-unfolding-istanbuls-sehir-university>.

²⁹ Global Influence Operations Report, 'Turkey', 19 April 2022. www.global-influence-ops.com/category/network/turkey/.

³⁰ Laurie A. Brand, *Citizens Abroad: Emigration and the State in the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 111; Lorenzo Vidino, 'Erdoğan's Long Arm in Europe', *Foreign Policy*, 7 May 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/07/erdogans-long-arm-in-europe-germany-netherlands-milli-gorus-muslim-brotherhood-turkey-akp/#>.

³¹ Global Influence Operations Report, 'Pro-AKP Lobbying Group to Open US Branch', 30 March 2022. www.global-influence-ops.com/pro-akp-lobbying-group-to-open-us-branch/.

³² Şebnem Köşer Akçapar and Damla Bayraktar Aksel, 'Public Diplomacy through Diaspora Engagement: The Case of Turkey', *Perceptions* 22:4 (2017): 138.

³³ Jonas Schaible, 'Office for the Protection of the Constitution: Extremists, Gun Enthusiasts and Spies', *T-Online*, 24 July 2018. www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/id_84164846/extremisten-waffennarren-und-spione.html.

tion's current Head of Europe was once a member of the Gray Wolves,³⁴ MHP's paramilitary wing that operates transnationally.³⁵

The Gray Wolves were outlawed in France in November due to far-right extremism, organised crime and violence. A report by a German organisation estimated that in 2020 around 11,000 people were directly affiliated with the Gray Wolves and that number increases if we also consider the Osmanen Germania, another nationalist group in Germany involved in multiple criminal cases and linked to Metin Kulunk, a high-ranking member of parliament in Erdoğan's party.³⁶

These organisations propagate the narratives of the AKP–MHP regime in the West, and also coordinate actions such as profiling of dissidents, targeting them with hate speech and physically attacking them. Although the regime has focused on Gülenists, especially after the 2016 coup attempt, it has deliberately kept the narrative as wide as possible to include all dissidents living abroad.³⁷ Transnationally the regime links all the dissident groups as co-collaborators, advancing the theory that they are all part of a bigger conspiracy. In 2019 a pro-government Turkish think tank (the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research – Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı, SETA) published a report titled 'PKK Structure in Europe'.³⁸ This report claims that all anti-regime groups, such as Alevis, Gülenists, leftists and Kurds, are somehow connected to the outlawed pro-Kurdish PKK, since it is the only Turkey-linked terrorist organisation recognised in Europe. Given that the regime continuously stresses that the Western world has been conspiring against Turkey through use of terrorist groups, this report was only published in the Turkish language and not in other languages such as English – although SETA publishes reports in other languages – which shows that the audience for this report was the Turkish-speaking diaspora.

As Erdoğan is depicted as the leader of the Muslim world, his nationalist and religious appeals targeting Turkish immigrants have gained dynamism.³⁹ Alp Kenan Dereci, who was one of the attackers against a coalition of Armenian–American and Kurdish–American protesters during Erdoğan's visit to Washington DC, stated 'we love our president very much. It is an honor for us to see and support him.'⁴⁰ Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, paid a visit to two arrested attackers, Sinan Narin and Eyüp Yıldırım, in

³⁴ Global Influence Operations Report, 'New Head of European Turkish Lobbying Group Was Member of Ultranationalist Movement', 19 February 2021. www.global-influence-ops.com/new-head-of-european-turkish-lobbying-group-was-member-of-ultranationalist-movement/.

³⁵ Gionathan Lo Mascolo, 'Turkish Extremist Group Grey Wolves Finds a Favourable Climate in Germany', *Open Democracy*, 30 November 2021. www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/turkish-extremist-group-grey-wolves-finds-a-favourable-climate-in-germany/.

³⁶ Ezel Sahinkaya, 'Germany Warns Turkey's Exiled Media of Apparent Hit List', *Voice of America*, 27 July 2021. www.voanews.com/press-freedom/germany-warns-turkeys-exiled-media-apparent-hit-list.

³⁷ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy under Siege* (New York: Freedom House, 2021).

³⁸ Enes Bayraklı, Hasan Basri Yalçın and Murat Yeşiltaş, *Avrupa'da PKK Yapılanması* (İstanbul: Seta, 2019).

³⁹ Sinem Adar, *Rethinking Political Attitudes of Migrants from Turkey and Their Germany-Born Children* (Berlin: SWP, 2019).

⁴⁰ New York Times, 'Erdogan Security Forces Launch "Brutal Attack" on Washington Protesters, Officials Say', *New York Times*, 17 May 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/05/17/us/turkish-embassy-protest-dc.html.

Washington DC and tweeted pictures with the caption ‘I delivered them our nation’s love and greetings’,⁴¹ presenting these violent attacks against peaceful dissidents as noble acts, the right thing to do.

A striking example of significant implications of the AKP–MHP regime’s transnational repression is a letter written by the AFIC (the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils) president Dr Rateb Jneid asking Erdoğan to collaborate in destroying the Gülenists.⁴² Claiming that ‘the Gülenists are the most effectively organized in Australia and continue to threaten to penetrate the Muslim community’, Dr Rateb Jneid requested a meeting with Erdoğan during his planned trip to Turkey with high-level Australian–Muslim community leaders, to discuss ‘a strategy to work together to dismantle and weaken the local Gülenist scourge in Australia’. In the letter, Dr Rateb Jneid states that his group has been ‘in the process of working on a strategy that will effectively destroy Gülenists’ and believes that its strategy could be applied anywhere in the world, because for him ‘a strong and advanced Turkey means a strong a vibrant Muslim world’.⁴³ The letter starts by praising Turkey as a ‘confidence-booster and an enlightenment to millions of people around the world’, and Erdoğan personally for his ‘visionary leadership, which has been an unprecedented inspiration to the Muslim world, including the Muslims in Australia’. It ends with him designating an Australian–Turk board member of AFIC, Kazim Ates, to handle all of the communication between AFIC and the office of the Turkish presidency.⁴⁴ Both Jneid and Ates have claimed that this was not the draft that was sent to the Turkish President but an early unpublished draft that someone else in AFIC wrote, using the digital signature of Jneid. However, the signature appears to be a wet signature. Also, despite claiming that a milder letter was sent to Erdoğan to request a meeting and to praise his leadership, neither Ates nor Jneid have ever published their version of the letter. It must be underlined that AFIC is not a Turkish organisation, has members from almost all Muslim national backgrounds and claims to represent all Muslims in Australia.

Ercan Karakoyun, the chairman of the Dialogue and Education Foundation in Germany, stated that after the coup attempt a Turkish school in Cologne was defamed on the internet as a terrorist space. Karakoyun also reported that ‘parents felt they were being caught in a witch hunt and signed off their children’.⁴⁵ In Denmark, pro-AKP–MHP diaspora networks circulated a list of Gülenist schools on Facebook. Listing names of the schools, they posted the message: ‘Save your children from Fethullah Gülen’s terror organisation’s schools.’ According to the reports, 366 students signed off from the schools after the summer break.⁴⁶

⁴¹ @MevlutCavusoglu, ‘Washington’da yargılanması devam eden Sinan Narin ve Eyüp Yıldırım kardeşlerimizi ziyaret ederek, Milletimizin sevgi ve selamlarını ilettik’, *Twitter*, 24 September 2017. <https://twitter.com/MevlutCavusoglu/status/911688303132495872?s=20>.

⁴² ABC, ‘Erdogan, AFIC and the Threat of Hizmet Movement’, 20 September 2017. www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/religionandethicsreport/erdogan-afic-and-the-threat-of-the-hizmet-movement/8964220.

⁴³ AFIC, ‘AFIC’s Letter signed by Dr. Rateb Jneid to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’, *AFIC*, 31 August 2017.

⁴⁴ AFIC, ‘AFIC’s Letter’.

⁴⁵ Yuriko Wohl-Immel, ‘Wie Erdogan Einfluss auf Schulen in Deutschland nimmt’, *Die Welt*, 31 July 2017. www.welt.de/regionales/nrw/article167201194/Wie-Erdogan-Einfluss-auf-Schulen-in-Deutschland-nimmt.html.

⁴⁶ The Guardian, ‘Turkish Diaspora in EU Divided over Erdoğan Following Failed Coup’, 18 July 2016. www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/18/turkish-diaspora-eu-erdogan-failed-coup.

During the evening of 15 July 2016, a group of people attacked a Gülen-affiliated Milad Intercultural Centre in Italy and set it on fire. According to news reports, this was the first time that national tension within a group of immigrants had led to violent actions in Modena.⁴⁷ Gray Wolves and Ulu Cami community members were suspected of carrying out this attack. Similarly, several cities in Germany, Netherlands and Belgium witnessed large demonstrations and several violent acts against the Gülenists. For example, 150 pro-regime supporters attacked a youth centre on the basis of its ties to the Gülen Movement. Attackers smashed the windows and damaged the building.⁴⁸

Turkish-origin European politicians, who have been labelled as traitors with ‘spoiled blood’ by the AKP–MHP regime, have been threatened by the AKP–MHP regime’s long arm in Europe. In Austria, Green Party member Berivan Aslan, who is of Kurdish origin and is known for her initiatives on Kurdish issues, stated that she was under police protection due to threats of a ‘Turkish state-related assassination plan’ during the election campaign. Perpetrator Fevzi Öztürk eventually surrendered to the Austrian intelligence services and confessed that he was working for Turkish intelligence (MIT).⁴⁹ Similarly, in Belgium, minister Zuhal Demir received threatening emails following her harsh criticism of Turkey’s Diyanet’s mosques, calling them Erdoğan’s long arm and the AKP–MHP regime’s antennas.⁵⁰

In Berlin, Birgün Daily journalist Erk Acarer was attacked with fists and knives in his apartment in July 2021.⁵¹ Exiled Turkish journalists Abdullah Bozkurt and Ahmet Dönmez were also physically attacked and hospitalised by pro-regime vigilante groups. In 2021, German and European authorities were alarmed by the discovery that names of Turkish dissident journalists in exile had been listed as part of a hitlist by Turkish intelligence and people close to the regime.⁵²

The Turkish government has achieved the goal of intimidating dissidents not only through these attacks, but also through the leverage it has over Europe in keeping refugees outside Europe.

CONCLUSION

Populists in power grow authoritarian and discursively frame their critics, opposition and (ethnic, religious, cultural and political) minority groups as existential threats to the people’s

⁴⁷ Carlo Gregori and Jose Gaetano Gasparini, ‘Modena, Attack on an Anti-Erdogan Turkish Circle: 4 Set Fire to the Headquarters’, *Gazetta di Modena*, 17 July 2016. <https://gazzettadimodena.gelocal.it/modena/cronaca/2016/07/17/news/modena-attentato-a-circolo-turco-anti-erdogan-in-4-danno-fuoco-alla-sede-1.13830293>.

⁴⁸ The Guardian, ‘Turkish Diaspora in EU’.

⁴⁹ Euronews, ‘Suikast iddiasıyla gündeme gelen Avusturyalı Kürt siyasetçiye polis koruması’, *Euronews*, 16 October 2020. <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/10/16/suikast-iddias-yla-gundeme-gelen-avusturyal-kurt-siyasetciye-polis-korumas>.

⁵⁰ Knack, ‘Man opgepakt voor bedreiging Zuhal Demir’, 20 November 2020. www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/man-opgepakt-voor-bedreiging-zuhal-demir/article-news-1668089.html.

⁵¹ Deutsche Welle, ‘Erk Acarer: Exiled Turkish Journalist Attacked in Berlin’, 8 July 2021.

www.dw.com/en/erk-acarer-exiled-turkish-journalist-attacked-in-berlin/a-58198335.

⁵² Ezel Sahinkaya, ‘Germany Warns Turkey’s Exiled Media of Apparent Hit List’, *Voice of America*, 27 July 2021. www.voanews.com/press-freedom/germany-warns-turkeys-exiled-media-apparent-hit-list.

(nation's) survival. Insecurities, fears, anxieties, siege mentality and a sense of victimhood at the hands of the Western powers have been legitimating sources of different manifestations of authoritarianism, securitisation of minorities, homogenising nation-building policies and populism in Turkey.

AKP's ruling de facto coalition with the ultranationalist, nativist far-right MHP is a significant manifestation of this authoritarian populism, which has anti-Western, anti-Semitic inclinations and substantially employs conspiracy theories. The AKP–MHP regime defines Turkish people narrowly since its populism is not inclusive, and designates individuals and groups such as non-Muslims, Alevis, disloyal Kurds, leftists, liberals, Academics for Peace, pro-EU groups, disloyal Islamists and Gülenists as dangerous others. In this authoritarian populist narrative, these groups are simply pawns of the conspiring foreign powers that do not want Erdoğan to lead the Muslim world against the oppression of the imperialist West and the Jewish lobby.

It must be underlined that not only secular or non-Sunni Muslim minorities, but also some Sunni practising Muslim or Islamist groups such as the Gülen Movement and Süleymanîcîs and followers of Adnan Oktar, Furkan Vakfı and the former Islamist prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, are also constructed as dangerous others just because they are dissidents. This is an inevitable result of the merger of populism and authoritarianism: the people of the populists are further exclusive; all dissidents are excluded even if they are from the same ethnicity, religion, sect and ideology.

The Turkish case is also a significant manifestation of state transnationalism and transnational repression, since these dissident and minority groups and their members are not repressed only in Turkey. Their extensions in diaspora have also experienced hate speech and physically violent attacks by supporters of the AKP–MHP regime in diaspora.

Last but not least, when it comes to its supporters abroad the regime is more inclusive, and its supporters are not only emigrants originating from Turkey but also those from different parts of the Sunni Muslim world.

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7. Varieties of feminisms in the Middle East and North Africa

Valentine M. Moghadam

INTRODUCTION

A remarkably resilient stereotype, certainly in Western countries, is that women's status in countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is everywhere low and women's movements are weak or nonexistent. And yet MENA women's movements not only span the region but have a long history, starting in the early twentieth century, which was documented in the first generation of studies on Middle East women's history.¹ Like women's movements everywhere, MENA women's protest activism has taken the form of involvement in broad movements (for example, nationalist, religious, communist, labor, peace, environmentalist, and so on) as well as in women's own movements. The rich literature that constitutes Middle East women's studies has analyzed the (often vexed) relationship between states and women's rights, as well as forms of advocacy and activism. Studies show how local/national context matters for the evolution of feminist strategies and discourses, the influence of global norms and movement diffusion, intra-regional learning, and cooperation and contention across feminist strands.

The present contribution draws on that literature, including my own past work,² to identify the *varieties* of MENA feminism, by which I mean the diversity of ideologies, discourses, and mobilizational strategies. Many scholars have explained the expansion of women's participation and rights in terms of autocratic state interests. Here I emphasize achievements and

¹ Early historical studies include Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution 1906–1911: Grassroots Democracy and the Origins of Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Lois Beck and Nikki R. Keddie, eds, *Women in the Muslim World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron, eds, *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries of Sex and Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Margaret L. Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker, eds, *Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999); Eliz Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement, and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982); Nuket Sirman, "Turkish Feminism: A Short History," *Women Living under Muslim Laws*, Dossier 5–6 (1989): 1–10. A second generation of Middle East women's history includes Nova Robinson, *Sisters of Men: Syrian and Lebanese Women's Transnational Campaigns for Arab Independence and Women's Rights*, PhD dissertation (Rutgers University, 2016).

² Nitza Berkovitch and Valentine M. Moghadam, "Middle East Politics and Women's Collective Action: Challenging the Status Quo," *Social Politics* 6:3 (1999): 273–91; Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: L. Rienner, 1993); Valentine M. Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Towards a Resolution of the Debate," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27:4 (2002): 1135–71; Valentine M. Moghadam, "Gender Regimes in the Middle East and North Africa: The Power of Feminist Movements," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 27:3 (2020): 467–85.

accomplishments resulting from the variety of feminist activism, as well as the obstacles and setbacks that women's rights movements have encountered. Moreover, whereas the specialist literature has tended to focus on "secular" versus "Islamic" feminism, I unpack those categories to identify *nationalist*, *transnational*, *developmentalist*, *radical*, and *liberal* varieties of **secular feminism**; and *Islamic*, *pragmatic*, and *Islamist* varieties of **Muslim feminism**.³ These varieties have been influenced primarily by domestic political histories, trends, and pressures, and secondarily by global discourses and movements. Such varieties may be found within women's movements as well as among women who take part in broader social movements and mobilizations.

Pertinent questions include: How did nationalism, revolutions, state-building, socialism, political Islam, and liberalization affect women's mobilizations, and what/where are their legacies today? What waves, or cycles of mobilization, can be identified? What is common and what is different in the grievances, claims, and strategies of women's rights movements in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Egypt? Why was comprehensive family law reform possible in Morocco but not in Iran? What is holding back the equal inheritance bill in Tunisia? When and over what issues do secular feminists and pious Muslim women's groups cooperate? Addressing those questions entails analysis of macro-politics, meso-level institutions, and micro-level attitudes and mobilizations. This chapter can only survey a limited set of themes and studies. I begin with an overview of the literature, followed by a survey of waves and forms of activism and strategic frames, along with achievements and setbacks. I end with some suggestions for future research.

THEORY AND LITERATURE OVERVIEW

What is distinctive about feminism? It is a set of ideas, claims, and objectives regarding the legal status and social positions of women. As a critique of women's subordinate status in the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of work, the polity, and cultural institutions, feminism calls for women's full citizenship rights and a recognition of the value of women's contributions. The feminist *movement*, a variety of a social movement, has encompassed nationally based and transnational strategies for women's participation and rights, inspired by diverse ideologies and deploying distinct resonant frames. Beckwith notes that *women's rights* or *feminist* movements are distinguished by their challenge of patriarchy. Lorber identifies varieties of feminism (for example, radical, socialist, Marxist, cultural, liberal) and their contributions to gender equality.⁴ Beginning in the 1970s, feminism inspired a new field of study,

³ Two caveats are in order. First, the women associated with Islamist movements and parties are not, strictly speaking, feminists and they reject the label. For more on this point, see Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 1999). Here I include them as part of the broad category "Muslim," if only to distinguish them from other forms of women's rights activism. Second, some of the mobilizational strategies I identify as part of the secular feminist repertoire may also be found among Muslim feminists; see, e.g., Rebecca Barlow and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Prospects for Feminism in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Human Rights Quarterly* 30 (2008): 21–40.

⁴ Karen Beckwith, "Beyond Compare? Women's Movements in Comparative Perspective," *European Journal of Political Research* 37 (2000): 431–68; Judith Lorber, "The Variety of Feminisms and Their Contributions to Gender Equality," Informationssystem der Universität Oldenburg, 1997.

conceptual framework, and academic program known as Women's Studies, which expanded globally. Concepts such as *patriarchy*, *the sexual division of labor*, *gender relations*, *women's empowerment*, and *gender regime* continue to inform social analysis. Feminism's imprint also may be found in policy institutes and in the "gender units" of government agencies and international organizations.

Rowbotham's classic study was instrumental in helping uncover women who had been "hidden from history," and Jayawardena analyzed the impact on women's rights of modernizing nationalisms in Asia; both generated a prodigious scholarship on the history of women's movements and women *in* movements. Following the debt crisis of the 1970s and implementation of structural adjustment policies in the Third World, feminist scholars contributed cogent critiques as well as analyses of women's movement responses to the imposed austerities. One movement response was the transnational feminist network.⁵

In identifying waves of feminist activism, scholars have shown differences between the early first-wave focus on suffrage and the origins of the second wave, although Taylor showed the links between the two in her study of "abeyance structures."⁶ More recently, scholars of Europe and the US have identified distinct discourses and strategies across countries. Ferree compares the "conservative Christian" and "social democratic" development of feminism in Germany with the liberal version in the US, and the different discourses around abortion rights, to elucidate "varieties of feminism". Walby theorizes Western "gender regimes" historically and classifies current varieties as neoliberal versus social democratic.⁷

Research has explored why feminist movements and organizations emerge when they do, how they are affected by state policies and international processes, their mobilizational capacity, and their ability to influence policy, coalition-building, and framing processes.⁸ In separate writings, Alvarez and Htun and Weldon emphasize "women's movement autonomy and strength" as an important criterion for a feminist movement and critical for legal and policy changes for gender justice. Molyneux identifies *independent*, *associational*, and *directed* women's movements, with their different goals and strategies.⁹ Theoretical frameworks

⁵ Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History* (London: Pluto Press, 1973); Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985); Valentine M. Moghadam, *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

⁶ Verta Taylor, "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance," *American Sociological Review* 54:5 (1989): 761–75.

⁷ Myra Marx Ferree, *Varieties of Feminism: German Gender Politics in Global Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Sylvia Walby, "The European Union and Gender Equality: Emergent Varieties of Gender Regime," *Social Politics* 12:3 (2004): 321–43.

⁸ Excellent collections include Lee Ann Banaszak, Karen Beckwith, and Dieter Rucht, eds, *Women's Movements Facing the Reconfigured State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Amrita Basu, ed., *Women's Movements in a Global Era* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2017); Jane Jaquette, ed., *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Participation and Democracy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁹ Sonia Alvarez, "Advocating Feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO 'Boom'," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1:2 (1999): 181–209; Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon, *The Logics of Gender Justice: State Action on Women's Rights around the World* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Maxine Molyneux, "Analyzing Women's Movements." In *Feminist Visions of Development: Analysis and Policy*, edited by Cecile Jackson and Ruth Pearson (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998).

deployed to address these issues include social movement theorizing, feminist international relations, Marxism, feminist political economy, and world polity theory.

Across the globe, the feminist agenda has been diffused through multilateral agencies, international non-governmental organizations, and international treaties. In turn, locally based feminist organizations have been able to effect important legal and policy changes in their countries, as has occurred across MENA as well. As with other social movements, feminism has faced counter-movements and backlash, most recently from right-wing populist-nationalist movements and political parties. In MENA, right-wing populist movements are typically Islamist.

MENA scholars have contributed prolifically to the international literature through studies of the relationship between feminist and nationalist movements;¹⁰ feminism and state policy;¹¹ women and Islamist movements;¹² the left, communism, and feminism;¹³ and feminism and liberal democracy.¹⁴ Opportunities and constraints in women's organizing for legal and policy

¹⁰ Studies of MENA nationalism and women's rights include Nadjé Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, "Between Nationalism and Women's Rights: The Kurdish Women's Movement in Iraq," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4 (2011): 337–53; Deborah Gerner, "Mobilizing Women for Nationalist Agendas." In *From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements, and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia*, edited by V.M. Moghadam (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 17–39; Shahrzad Mojab, ed., *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2001).

¹¹ Studies of women and state policy include Nadjé Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Laurie Brand, *Women, the State, and Political Liberalization* [Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Mounira M. Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Mervat Hatem, "Privatization and the Demise of State Feminism in Egypt 1977–1990." In *Mortgaging Women's Lives: Feminist Critiques of Structural Adjustment*, edited by Pamela Sparr (London: Zed Books, 1994); Suad Joseph, ed., *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000); Denis Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam and the State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991); Rania Maktabi, "Family Law, Female Citizenship, and State Formation in Arab States: Pre-2011 Conditions and Post-2011 Reflections on Political Transitions." In *Religion, Law, and Justice: Seven Essays*, edited by Håkan Rydving and Stefan Olsson (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture: Novus Forlag, 2018), 97–131; Zakia Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

¹² On Islamist women, see Janine A. Clark and Jillian Schwedler, "Who Opened the Window? Women's Activism in Islamist Parties," *Comparative Politics* 35:3 (April 2003): 293–312; Lisa Taraki, "Islam Is the Solution: Jordanian Islamists and the Dilemma of the 'Modern Woman'." *British Journal of Sociology* 46:4 (1995): 643–61.

¹³ On women and the Left, see Selma Botman, "Egyptian Women in the Communist Movement, 1939–54," *Women's Studies International Forum* 11:2 (1988): 117–26; Hanan Hammad, "The Other Extremists: Marxist Feminism in Egypt, 1980–2000," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 12:3 (2011): 217–33; Frances Hasso, "'The Women's Front': Nationalism, Feminism, and Modernity in Palestine," *Gender & Society* 12:4 (1998): 441–65; Maxine Molyneux, "Legal Reform and Social Revolution in Democratic Yemen: Women and the Family," *International Journal of the Sociology of Law* 13 (1985): 47–72; Hamed Shahidian, "The Iranian Left and 'The Woman Question' in the Revolution of 1978–79," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26:2 (1994): 223–47.

¹⁴ Yesim Arat, "Democracy and Women in Turkey: In Defense of Liberalism," *Social Politics* 6:3 (1999): 370–87.

reform are discussed by scholars of Tunisia¹⁵ and Iran,¹⁶ among others. In addition to analyses of women's advocacy within single countries, comparative studies elucidate similarities and differences across cases.¹⁷

WAVES OF MENA FEMINIST ACTIVISM

In the early decades of the twentieth century, women's progress was seen primarily in access to schooling, and was closely tied to larger projects of nationalism and anti-colonialism. For their part, MENA women joined nationalist, national liberation, and socialist movements, and took part in international mobilizations. Egyptian women's groups, active in the 1919 anti-British protests, participated in international women's meetings; Huda Sharawi formed the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923 after attending the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in Rome. The Eastern Women's Congresses convened in Damascus in 1930 and Tehran in

¹⁵ On Tunisia, see Khedija Arfaoui and Valentine M. Moghadam, "Violence against Women and Tunisian Feminism: Advocacy, Policy, and Politics in an Arab Context," *Current Sociology* 64:4 (2016): 637–53; ATFD, "Declaration: Women's Rights in Tunisia." Summary of Key Concerns Submitted by l'Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 4th Session, 2010; Alya Baffoun, "Feminism and Muslim Fundamentalism: The Algerian and Tunisian Cases." In *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective*, edited by V.M. Moghadam (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); Maryam Ben Salem and Soumaya Ben Cheikh, "Politique et jeunes femmes vulnérables en Tunisie: étude qualitative Gafsa – Kasserine – Tozeur." Tunis: CAWTAR, UNESCO, Royaume des Pays-Bas, 2013; Mounira M. Charrad, "Policy Shifts: State, Islam, and Gender in Tunisia, 1930s–1990s." *Social Politics* (Summer 1997): 284–319; CREDIF, "Tunisienne et action politique." *Revue du CREDIF* 45 (2013); Sarah Gilman, "Feminist Organizing in Tunisia: Negotiating Transnational Linkages and the State." In *From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements, and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia*, edited by V.M. Moghadam (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 97–119; Amel Grami, "Gender Equality in Tunisia." In *Gender and Diversity in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Zahia Smail Salhi (London: Routledge, 2010); Tchaicha and Arfaoui (2017).

¹⁶ Some of the numerous studies on Iran include: Mahnaz Afkhami, *The Other Side of Silence*, University of North Carolina Press (forthcoming); Barlow and Akbarzadeh, "Prospects for Feminism"; Valentine M. Moghadam and Fatemeh Haghighatjoo, "Women and Political Leadership in an Authoritarian Context: A Case Study of the Sixth Parliament in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Politics & Gender* 12:1 (2016): 168–97; Arezoo Osanloo, *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Catherine Sameh, *Axis of Hope: Iranian Women's Activism across Borders* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2019); Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Nazanin Shahrokni, *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

¹⁷ Comparative studies include Valentine M. Moghadam, "Gender Regimes in the Middle East and North Africa: The Power of Feminist Movements," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 27:3 (2020): 467–85; Valentine M. Moghadam and Elham Gheytanchi, "Political Opportunities and Strategic Choices: Comparing Feminist Campaigns in Morocco and Iran," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly of Social Movement Research* 15:3 (2010): 267–88; Mona Tajali, "Islamic Women's Groups and the Quest for Political Representation in Turkey and Iran," *Middle East Journal* 69:4 (2015): 563–81; Aili Tripp, *Seeking Legitimacy: Why Arab Autocracies Adopt Women's Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Gizem Turkarslan, *Engendering Citizenship: Women's Movements in Tunisia and Turkey* (PhD diss., Koc University, 2019).

1932, where women “staked their own claim to modernity.”¹⁸ First-wave Turkish feminism spanned the late Ottoman and early Republican periods. Dozens of women’s organizations existed at the start of the Republican period, with most women’s groups framing their demands in Islamic terms. The Republican period saw the establishment of transnational links, and the Turkish Women’s Federation helped organize the 1935 IWSA 12th Congress.¹⁹ Following World War II, the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) mobilized socialist/communist women, including from MENA countries.²⁰ Women members of the communist movement in Egypt broke social taboos by mingling with men through their participation in political party work. The same was true of Iran’s Tudeh Party in the 1940s, until its decimation after the 1953 US/UK-sponsored coup d’état against Premier Mohammad Mossadegh.²¹

The 1960s and 1970s saw the formation of Cuban-inspired guerrilla movements, which were open to women. Although these were not explicitly feminist, egalitarian gender relations were largely practiced, especially in the Iranian context.²² Egypt’s Arwa Salih was a leader of the Marxist-Leninist Workers’ Party in the early 1970s. Nawal Saadawi, a feminist pioneer, emphasized both class and patriarchy and called for socialist democracy. The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) was known as “the women’s front,” because of its many women members and its pro-women policies.²³ All such engagements facilitated feminist agency for many MENA women.

The link between the communist era and the formation of feminist groups in the 1980s is especially relevant, in at least two ways. First, before the formation of second-wave feminist organizations in the 1980s/1990s, MENA communist movements were the most forward-looking culturally and in terms of gender relations, and that cultural modernity diffused to the subsequent generation. Second, many of the founders/leaders of the feminist groups that emerged in the 1980s had been active in left-wing movements. The left movements had provided a learning base for the political analysis, social critique, and organizational skills

¹⁸ See Charlotte Weber, “Between Nationalism and Feminism: The Eastern Women’s Congresses of 1930 and 1932,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 4 (2008): 83–106; the quote appears on p.85.

¹⁹ Gezim Kaftan, “The Turkish Women’s Movement in Abeyance,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 21:6 (2020): 184–95; Yesim Arat, “From Emancipation to Liberation: The Changing Role of Women in Turkey’s Public Realm,” *Journal of International Affairs* 54:1 (2000): 107–23.

²⁰ On the WIDF, see Francisca De Haan, “Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women’s Organizations: The Case of the Women’s International Democratic Federation,” *Women’s History Review* 19:4 (2010): 547–73; and Elisabeth Armstrong, “Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women’s Movement in Asia and the Women’s International Democratic Federation,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 41:22 (2016): 305–31.

²¹ After the 1953 coup, Iran’s Tudeh Party revived itself, working largely underground in and out of Iran, until the final blow after the 1979 Islamic revolution. On Egypt, see Selma Botman, “Egyptian Women in the Communist Movement, 1939–54,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 11:2 (1988): 117–26.

²² See Sevil Çakır-Kılınçoğlu, *The Radicalization of the Left in Turkey and Iran in the 1970s and a Comparative Analysis of Activist Women’s Experiences* (PhD diss, Leiden University, 2019); Halleh Ghorashi, “From Marxist Organizations to Feminism: Iranian Women’s Experiences of Revolution and Exile,” Special issue on Gender and/in Ideologies: *The Journal of the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 6 (2003): 89–107.

²³ On Egypt, see Arwa Salih, *The Stillborn: Notebooks from the Student-Movement Generation in Egypt*, translated by Samah Selim (London: Seagull, 2018). Salih wrote fearlessly about the collapse of the Left but also on illusions about Arab states. She died tragically by her own hand in 1996. On the DFLP, see Hasso, “‘The Women’s Front’.”

that the new generation of feminist movement leaders displayed. The socialist/communist notion of women's equality informed the demand for reform of patriarchal family laws, which placed women under the control of male kin. After 1990, MENA feminists largely moved away from the socialist vision, though its legacy may be seen in the contemporary Kurdish women's movement in Turkey and Syria, which combines elements of feminism, Kurdish nationalism, and socialism.²⁴ Synergies between left and feminist formations can be seen in feminist leadership of socialist political parties. Algeria's Workers' Party, formed in 1990, has long had a woman leader, Louisa Hanoune; the Progressive Democratic Party in Tunisia, formed in 2006, was co-led by Maya Jribi (she died in 2018, aged 58); and in Morocco, the Unified Socialist Party has been led by Nabila Mounib.

Waves of women's rights mobilizations are also country-specific, subject to periods of growth, decline, or abeyance. Kaftan identifies a Turkish feminist wave during the early Republican era followed by a long abeyance period, and a revival in the 1980s followed by setbacks after 2010. Iranian women's mobilizations first occurred during the constitutional revolution of the early twentieth century and through the 1920s, until Reza Shah's authoritarian rule set in. The second wave occurred in March 1979, when thousands of women protested Khomeini's edict regarding *hejab* versus "nakedness," and continued until the Islamist regime consolidated power and repressed all opposition in 1980–1. In the third wave of June 2005, some 2,000 women from across the country held a sit-in protest in front of the University of Tehran, five days before a presidential election, to protest discriminatory constitutional articles and demand women's equality.²⁵ The clampdown on independent organizing subsequently led to the closure of several organized feminist initiatives, although online activism continued. A new wave, this time with nationwide protests, erupted in Fall 2022 following the death in police custody of Mahsa Jina Amini.

Global Diffusion and Domestic Drivers of the Women's Rights/Feminist Agenda

Globally, the women's rights agenda diffused through the UN Decade for Women and what would become four world conferences on women. This agenda comprised treaties that governments signed, including the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, in force in 1981), the 1985 Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, the 1993 Vienna Declaration on human rights, and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. International labor conventions on non-discrimination in education and in employment were promoted by the UN's Education, Science, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Labor Organization (ILO). The 1994 Conference on Population and Development, co-hosted by the UN's Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), was held in Cairo with the participation of women's rights activists as well as government representatives. Those initiatives provided space for MENA women's organizing, and legitimacy for the articulation of their grievances, aspirations, and demands. Issues such as "honor crimes" in Jordan, female circumcision in Egypt, domestic violence in Turkey, and family inequality everywhere were discussed at the regional preparatory meetings that preceded the international ones, and they became central issues in feminist advocacy and activism.

²⁴ Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

²⁵ Mahsa Shekarloo, "Iranian Women Take on the Constitution," *MERIP*. August 21, 2005.

Another driver was the rise of Islamist movements and parties and accommodation by governments, which in some countries led to the strengthening or introduction of patriarchal family laws. In Iran, the Islamization process after 1980 reversed the previous decade's gains, abrogating the 1974 family law. Gains in women's rights were reversed or defeated when governments placated Islamists in Egypt, Jordan, and Algeria in the 1980s. In socialist Yemen, unification with the North in 1990 led to the replacement of the PDRY's progressive family code with a patriarchal code that placed women and girls under the control of male kin. In response to such reversals, secular feminists created advocacy networks. The Moroccan feminist sociologist Fatima Mernissi, a founder of the country's human rights league, mobilized a group of anti-fundamentalist Maghrebi professionals and activists. Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian feminists formed the Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité and organized workshops at the NGO Forum of the Beijing conference.²⁶ The grievances, critiques, and priorities of secular feminisms across countries during that period (and since) may be summarized as the following:

- Family laws that keep women in a subordinate position within the family; allow polygamy and unilateral male divorce; stipulate unequal inheritance for male and female kin.
- Violence against women: domestic or family violence, including "honor killings" and female circumcision; harassment of women in public spaces, and workplace harassment.
- Nationality laws that enable a man married to a foreign woman to pass his nationality to his children but do not enable a woman married to a foreigner to do the same.
- Laws and norms that exclude women from certain professions, especially judgeships, and other leadership roles.
- Poverty, exclusion, and exploitation of women workers.
- Ratification/implementation of CEDAW and removal of any reservations.

Secular–Islamist Contention

In principle, the women of Islamist movements and parties could be allies in campaigns for women's participation or empowerment. In the Islamic Republic of Iran in the early 1990s, women associated with the ruling circles, in concert with women's rights advocates in Iran's incipient civil society, helped to overturn restrictions on fields of study and established causes for women to obtain a divorce (men did not require any cause).²⁷ Rosofsky-Wickham, an expert on Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, contended that reform and moderation had taken place, but Hammad noted that Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood called for women's withdrawal from the workplace.²⁸ In their study of Islamist parties in Jordan and Yemen, Clark and Schwedler discussed the recruitment and activism of women members. Turam's study of Turkey's Gulen

²⁶ Early studies of these developments are Deniz Kandiyoti, *Women, Islam and the State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991); Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: L. Rienner, 1993). See also "Gender, Politics and the State: What do Middle Eastern Women Want", *Middle East Policy* 5:3 (Sept. 1997): 155–89, with contributions by Augustus Richard Norton, Diane Singerman, Mary E. Morris, Valentine M. Moghadam, Munira A. Fakro, Ayse Saktanber, Lisa Taraki, Boutheina Cheriet, Sheila Carapico.

²⁷ Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, ch. 6.

²⁸ Carrie Rosofsky-Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (Princeton University Press, 2002); Hammad, "The Other Extremists," 222.

movement did the same, but highlighted the limited nature of women's autonomy, mobility, and leadership within the organization. Arat examined how Islamist women in Turkey's Refah Party helped place women's issues in the party's political program, yet they still confronted barriers. Although their "success was a result of crossing boundaries between the private and the political, secular and religious, democratic and authoritarian, and individualistic and communitarian," their "failures were defined by the boundaries they were unable to cross, such as the glass ceiling separating themselves from the men in their party."²⁹

Islamist parties and movements typically oppose aspects of the feminist agenda, such as support for single mothers, equal inheritance, abortion, sexual rights, and banning early marriage and polygamy. The antipathy is mutual. Egypt's *Bint al-Ard* (Daughters of the Land), a Marxist-feminist group led by Sana al-Misri (1958–2000), and the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, led by the socialist-feminist Nawal Saadawi (1931–2021), were hostile not only to the global capitalist system and the Egyptian state under Sadat and Mubarak, but also to the political Islamist forces that had proliferated across the region.³⁰ The contention between the secular and Islamist projects was especially marked in Tunisia following the 2011 political revolution and the democratic transition, which enabled a newly empowered Islamist party, Ennahda, to take center stage and seek to overturn elements of the country's liberal family law.

Islamist women may be present in the public sphere, as voters, protesters, professionals, and members of parliament, and at times they may cooperate with women's rights advocates on specific issues, such as occurred in Tunisia around the 2017 violence against women law. In general, however, *Islamist women's activism* should be distinguished from two other forms of Muslim women's activism: *Islamic feminism* (see below) and *pragmatic feminism*. As Paidar explained for Iran and Gray for Morocco and Tunisia, Muslim pragmatists have a less ideological set of frames and goals for legal and policy reform.³¹ In contrast, Islamist women are motivated more by religious norms and obligations than by a commitment to women's equality, and as party members or supporters, they align themselves with those movements' broader political goals.

Varieties of Movement Frames

In social movement theorizing, "framing" is a schema of interpretation; a way of messaging or of conveying information, including grievances, strategies, and goals. Frames help encourage

²⁹ Arat, *Rethinking Islam*, 10; Clark and Schwedler, "Who Opened the Window?"; Berna Turam, *Between Islam and the State: The Politics of Engagement* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

³⁰ See Hammad, "The Other Extremists," 220. Bint al-Misri went even further in its principled stance by refusing any international donor funds. For more on revolutionary feminism in Egypt, see Amal Amireh, "Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World," *Signs* 26:1 (2000): 215–49. An early study of Nawal Saadawi's socialist feminism is found in Kevin Dwyer, *Arab Voices: The Human Rights Debate in the Middle East* (Redwood City: University of California Press, 1991), especially pages 194–5.

³¹ Doris Gray, "Feminism, Islamism and a Third Way." In *Contemporary Morocco: State, Politics and Society under Mohammed VI*, edited by Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisenwine, 136–46 (London: Routledge, 2012); and Gray, *Beyond Feminism and Islamism: Gender and Equality in North Africa* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2015); Parvin Paidar, *Gender of Democracy: The Encounter Between Feminism and Reformism in Contemporary Iran* (Geneva: UNRISD, 2001).

certain understandings and discourage others, and thus build solidarity around a common goal.³² A feminist demand for family law reform, for example, can be framed as necessary for family wellbeing, or to enable women to contribute more fully to socio-economic development; it may be framed as a requirement for women's full citizenship or to deepen democratization. Family law reform could be framed as consistent with Islam's intrinsically egalitarian nature. Different types of feminism—Marxist, radical, liberal, nationalist, maternalist, Islamic—might frame the problem and the solution differently, with a view to resonate with particular audiences. The *varieties* examined in this chapter are accompanied by distinctive *frames*.

Islamic feminism was the term coined by Iranian scholars in the 1990s to describe the activities and frames of Muslim women who had formed a magazine that questioned their unequal status within the Islamic Republic. Drawing on Islamic history and texts to make a case for women's emancipation in a religious vein, the activists deployed the Islamic notion of *ijtihad*, or reinterpretation in a new context.³³ A growing literature on Islamic feminism followed for Arab countries and elsewhere.³⁴ *Ijtihad* was successfully deployed in Morocco, culminating in the family law reform of 2003–4. In Egypt it was adopted to press for the more limited *khul'* law that enabled women to obtain a divorce in return for forfeiture of their financial dower. In Algeria, however, feminists rejected that framing and insisted on non-religious language for the family law amendments proposed in the late 1990s and early 2000s; they were, though, sidelined by the government's political considerations and Islamist objections.³⁵ In 2016, Morocco's Asma Lamrabet, a medical doctor, called for an end to “dogmatic and patriarchal interpretations undermining any Islamic thought,” explaining that “Islamic feminism today puts into question the socio-cultural foundations of injustice and discrimination of all disadvantaged and marginalized people, women or men.”³⁶ Established in 2009, the *Musawah* (Equality) international network of Islamic feminists is active in many countries and in 2020 launched a campaign for family law reform.³⁷

³² David Snow and Robert Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization,” *International Social Movement Research* 1:1 (1988): 197–9.

³³ Ziba Mir Hosseini, “Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Sharia in Post-Khomeini Iran.” In *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, edited by Mai Yamani (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Moghadam, “Islamic Feminism and its Discontents”; Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Feminism in an Islamic Republic: ‘Years of Hardship, Years of Growth’.” In *Islam, Gender, and Social Change in the Muslim World*, edited by Yvonne Y. Haddad and John Esposito, 59–84 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Nayereh Tohidi, “‘Islamic Feminism’: A Democratic Challenge or a Theocratic Reaction?” *Kankash* 13 (1997). The Islamic feminist project in Iran arguably reached a dead end, and in the face of official resistance to change, most of its proponents increasingly took on secular language.

³⁴ Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009); Amel Grami, “Islamic Feminism: A New Feminist Movement or a Strategy by Women for Acquiring Rights?” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 6:1 (2013): 102–13; Grami, “Muslim Women Seize a Place of Their Own in the World of Religious Knowledge,” *Al-Raida* 148/149/150 (Winter/Spring/Summer 2015/16): 53–69; Fatima Sadiqi, “Navigating the Berber Culture/Islamic Feminism Intersection,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 2 (Winter 2017): 146–56.

³⁵ Dorte Engelcke, “Family Law Reform in Algeria: National Politics, Key Actors, and Transnational Factors.” In *Social Change in North Africa: What Counts as Revolutionary?* edited by Doris Gray and Nadia Sonneveld, 308–30 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³⁶ Alexandra Krauska, *Morocco World News*, July 27, 2016. Among Lamrabet's demands is decriminalization of breaking the fast publicly during Ramadan.

³⁷ See *Musawah*, at: www.musawah.org/about/.

A different set of framings is found in the series of anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist conferences that convened in Cairo between December 2002 and March 2008. Initially convened to build an international movement against the US-led invasion of Iraq, the conferences created new opportunities for building alliances among Egyptians in opposition to imperialism, Zionism, dictatorship, and neoliberal economic reforms. In the parallel Women's Forum that was held after 2005, as Pratt writes, women spoke of supporting men in the struggles against Zionism and imperialism in Palestine and Iraq, and they criticized Western values and norms:

They [the West] try to influence us with their consumerism and immorality. They want us to be like their women. Do not teach us freedom because we know what freedom is. Freedom is getting rid of the occupation and controlling our own wealth. It is not the freedom of homosexuality and immorality. It is not the freedom promoted by Condoleezza Rice.

In one session organized by women members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the impact of globalization was discussed in terms of the West exporting particular "feminist" concerns—such as domestic violence, gay rights, and the eradication of female genital mutilation. "The consensus of the session was that Western moral and cultural values were corrupting 'Egyptian womanhood'."³⁸ At the Cairo conferences, therefore, nationalist and Islamist frames were in evidence, while the feminist frame was absent. A similar pattern was found during the Tahrir Square protests in January 2011. Allam explains that women's participation in Egypt's Arab Spring was framed in nationalist terms, and many of the women she interviewed eschewed the feminist label.³⁹ In contrast, Tunisian and Algerian feminist demands have been framed as *citoyennité*, that is, women's full and equal citizenship.

The maternalist frame is seen in many women's peace groups, such as Turkey's Saturday Mothers and Women's Peace Initiative, in Israel's Women in Black, and in Iran's networks of mothers of political prisoners. (The most famous, and effective, case of activist motherhood is that of Argentina's Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo.)⁴⁰ Secular feminists in Iran, however, eschew it, as the language of "woman as mother" is an integral part of the state and Islamist discourse. Tunisia's *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* (ATFD) rarely deploys the maternalist discourse, but feminist trade unionists, while opposed to the Islamic language of male and female "complementarity," advocate for lengthier paid maternity leave and more pre-school facilities, if only to compensate women's double burden and improve workplace conditions for working mothers, especially in the private sector. As such, feminist trade unionists combine a maternalist and an egalitarian politics—one that could resonate more with working-class, poor, and less educated women.⁴¹

³⁸ Nicola Pratt, "The Gender Logics of Resistance to the 'War on Terror': Constructing Sex–Gender Difference through the Erasure of Patriarchy in the Middle East," *Third World Quarterly* 33:12 (2012): 1821–36. See also Maha Abdelrahman, "'With the Islamists?—Sometimes. With the State?—Never!' Cooperation between the Left and Islamists in Egypt," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36:1 (2009): 37–54.

³⁹ Nermin Allam, *Women and the Egyptian Revolution: Engagement and Activism during the 2011 Arab Uprisings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁴⁰ For details on the maternalist frame, see Michelle Carreon and Valentine M. Moghadam, "'Resistance Is Fertile': Revisiting Maternalist Frames across Cases of Women's Mobilization," *Women's Studies International Forum* 51 (2015): 19–30.

⁴¹ The statements about Tunisian feminist frames are based on my years of research and interviews with members of the *Femmes Démocrates*, AFTURD, and the women's section of the UGTT. See

WORKING WITH AND OUTSIDE THE STATE

Feminists have long pondered the relationship with the state, and in strategic terms, they have worked with, against, or inside the state to achieve women's—or the movement's—participation and rights. During the period of postcolonial state-building, and through the 1980s, women were active in state-sponsored official women's organizations. To varying degrees and within certain limits, “state feminism” enabled women's emancipation in Egypt under Nasser, in Tunisia under Bourguiba, in the early years of Baath rule in Iraq, in the period 1963–75 in Iran, and of course the PDRY. The rise of feminist NGOs during the neoliberal shift eclipsed the state-led organizations, though the latter continued in some form within government agencies or as stand-alone ministries of women's affairs. As such, sympathetic bureaucrats present at local, national, and global governance levels helped to institutionalize women's rights and implement international conventions. For example, the UN's regional commission for West Asia (ESCWA), headquartered in Beirut, conducts research and advocacy on violence against women and national action plans for women, peace, and security, holding meetings attended by feminist scholar-activists as well as government officials (see www.UNESCWA.org).

Unlike trade unions, with their mass membership, most feminist groups are small and under-resourced. Some have accepted funds from government agencies while others reject this recourse, relying on funds generated internally or from INGOs and donor agencies. To achieve their goals, many groups foster ties to supportive bureaucrats and members of parliament. Moroccan feminists within *l'Association démocratique des femmes du Maroc* (ADFM) and *l'Union de l'action féminine* (UAF) collaborated with progressive women members of parliament and cabinet members, enabling the 2002 quota law, the 2004 family law reform, and anti-sexual harassment campaigns. Turkey's new feminist movement experienced growth in the 1980s and influence in the 1990s. In addition to building several feminist institutions, such as the Women's Library in Istanbul, an innovation was the “purple needle” anti-sexual harassment campaign in the 1980s and early 1990s, whereby purple knitting needles were distributed on the streets as a symbol of women's self-protection against men's sexual harassment. Elite allies helped secure successes. Ayata and Tutuncu interviewed 20 female parliamentary members and concluded that cooperation with male deputies from leftist and centrist parties, along with feminist NGO advocacy, helped secure progressive reforms in the Civil Code in 2002 and the Penal Code in 2004.⁴²

Tunisia's ATFD eschewed funds from government agencies, insisting on autonomy and distance from the state, although they did cooperate on various research and advocacy projects with like-minded women who worked within state-affiliated policy agencies such as CREDIF and the *Union Nationale des Femmes Tunisiennes*, as well as with progressive women members of parliament, the human rights organization, and the trade union UGTT. After the 2011 revolution, feminists continued their advocacy work to end violence against women and to acquire equal inheritance rights. In 2018 the president, Beji Caid Essebsi, appointed an eight-member Committee on Individual Rights and Liberties (COLIBE in the French acronym) that included four women, including the well-known feminists and legal scholars

Valentine M. Moghadam, “Women's Employment in Tunisia: Structures, Institutions, Advocacy,” *Sociology of Development* 5:4 (2019): 337–59.

⁴² Ayse Gunes Ayata and Fatma Tutuncu, “Critical Acts without a Critical Mass: The Substantive Representation of Women in the Turkish Parliament,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 61:3 (2008): 461–75.

Bohra Bel Haj Hmida and Iqbal Gharbi. In March 2018, the Tunisian Coalition for Equality in Inheritance, composed of some 70 women's rights groups, mobilized hundreds of protesters in front of the parliament to call for a law guaranteeing equal family inheritance rights for women. Such activism and alliances helped secure the lifting of CEDAW reservations in 2011, the pro-feminist constitutional articles of 2014, the 2017 anti-domestic violence law, and the 2018 parliamentary bill on equal inheritance.⁴³

In 2008, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan adopted the Family Protection Act to combat the problem of domestic violence and provide greater services to victims of abuse. This followed years of advocacy against "honor crimes."⁴⁴ Lebanon, with its numerous religio-ethnic communities and multiple personal status laws, finds it difficult to introduce a unified family law. Elsewhere, feminists have seen the following achievements: changes in the penal code that previously enabled a rapist to avoid imprisonment by marrying his victim; the right of women married to foreign men to pass on their nationality to their children; adoption of gender quotas; adoption of anti-domestic violence legislation; and the lifting of CEDAW reservations to facilitate broader legal, policy, and normative change. In separate writings, Maktabi and Moghadam have drawn attention to the role of feminist lawyers in such gains.⁴⁵

As noted, collaborations with government allies in Iran have yielded some results. Female parliamentarians of the 5th and 6th Majles with ties to women's rights NGOs (examples of "pragmatic feminists") pushed for legal and policy reforms around marriage and education. They succeeded in enabling young women to study abroad without a *mahram* (legitimate male guardian), raising the minimum age of marriage for girls from puberty to 13 (the demand for age 15 was denied), and securing the parliamentary passage of CEDAW, although it was not ratified into law by the Guardian Council.⁴⁶ The NGO *Abuse Monitor*, launched in 2018 by a group of women's rights activists working with local officials, was able to spread its message about sexual harassment both online and in public places. The Tehran municipality allowed the activists to display posters and brochures in metro and bus stations. Co-founder Ghoncheh Ghavami was quoted as saying: "We pushed this idea forward by studying similar tactics in different countries and tried to inform the public about the abuse of women and how it should be banned." Another initiative, *The Campaign to Stop Domestic Violence*, was active through social media sites and drafted a bill that it hoped would be adopted by the Majles (Jafari 2018). Allies within the government of former president Rouhani (2013–21) included his deputy and

⁴³ After Essebsi's death, the new president, Kais Saied, opposed the bill. In August 2021, feminist leader, Sana Ben Achour, issued a scathing critique of the president's populist politics and his opposition to equal inheritance, distributed via Facebook.

⁴⁴ Summer Forrester, "Protecting Women, Protecting the State: Militarism, Security Threats, and Government Action on Violence against Women in Jordan," *Security Dialogue* 50:6 (2019): 475–92; Rana Hussein, *Murder in the Name of Honor: The True Story of One Woman's Heroic Fight Against an Unbelievable Crime* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009).

⁴⁵ Rania Maktabi, "Female Lawyers in Morocco, Lebanon and Kuwait Speak after 2011," *The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends (NewME)* (University of Oslo, 2020); Moghadam, "Gender Regimes."

⁴⁶ Elaheh Koolae, "The Prospects for Democracy: Women Reformists in the Iranian Parliament." In *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, 2nd ed., edited by Fereshteh Nourae-Simone, 297–310 (New York: Feminist Press, 2014); Valentine M. Moghadam and Fatemeh Haghghatjoo, "Women and Political Leadership in an Authoritarian Context: A Case Study of the Sixth Parliament in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Politics and Gender* 12 (2016): 168–97.

advisor, lawyer, and women's rights advocate Shahindokht Molaverdi, who nonetheless kept a low profile to maintain a presence in government.

Across the MENA region, therefore, feminist strategies have been shaped by opportunity as well as ideology. Moreover, women's protest actions tend to be similar to those found elsewhere: public meetings, petition drives, conferences, production of research for advocacy, rallies and demonstrations, issue campaigns. These are, however, easier in countries with multi-party systems and strong civil societies, as opposed to those with more entrenched conservative norms or repressive states. Morocco and Tunisia provide the most leeway for such feminist activism, while women in Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia often face repression. Typically, though, activists must seek to "walk a fine line between stressing the universality of women's rights and goal of gender equality on the one hand and asserting the religious and cultural legitimacy of their progressive visions on the other."⁴⁷

Transnational Partnerships and Social Media Networking

As noted, MENA women's rights advocates have cultivated transnational ties and engagements since the early twentieth century. These have included collaborations with international partners, formal South–South linkages, and participation in UN meetings (such as the annual meetings of the Committee on the Status of Women, or attendance at meetings of the UN's regional commissions). MENA women's groups were largely absent from the transnational feminist networks (TFNs) that formed in the 1980s and early 1990s, although one Algerian feminist group, *Rassemblement Algérienne des femmes démocrates*, was closely involved with the TFN Women Living under Muslim Laws. In 1993 Maghrebi women formed their own TFN, the Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité, and produced sophisticated advocacy documents. The Sisterhood Is Global Institute and its successor, the Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace (WLP), included Moroccan, Jordanian, and Lebanese women's rights groups. WLP's South–South learning model helped Iranian feminists adopt the Moroccan "One Million Signatures" campaign and the Tunisian "Feminist School"; WLP continues to diffuse Iranian feminist travails through its website and use of social media platforms. In 2013 and again in 2015, the World Social Forum was held in Tunis, with the participation of the TFN *Marche Mondiale des Femmes*, among others. The ATFD were part of the organizing committee and thus received enhanced regional and international visibility. Musawah exemplifies an Islamic feminist group with a transnational orientation. Its mission statement calls for reform in the following areas: Islamic sources, international human rights standards, national laws, and lived realities of men and women. Musawah includes several well-known scholar-activists as well as organizational partners such as Morocco's ADFM and Malaysia's Sisters in Islam.⁴⁸

Whether to bypass state censorship or because of its ubiquity, the use of social networking media has become a mainstay within women's rights movements. Young Tunisian women bloggers such as Lina Ben Mhenni ("A Tunisian Girl" blog) took part in an anti-censorship protest in May 2010 and blogged extensively during and after Tunisia's 2011 political revolu-

⁴⁷ Moghadam and Gheythanchi, "Political Opportunities," 270.

⁴⁸ See www.musawah.org/about/ and Musawah September 2017 newsletter: www.musawah.org/sites/default/files/Vision%20Newsletter%20issue%20n%C2%AF22_final.compressed_0.pdf.

tion. (Tragically, Ben Mhenni died in 2020, aged just 37.) In 2015, the arrest and prosecution of two young Moroccan women on charges of “gross indecency” for wearing “tight and immoral” clothes led to three protest sit-ins in Agadir, Rabat, and Casablanca. Two Facebook pages were created to support them, with many Moroccan women sharing pictures of themselves wearing minis-skirts with the hashtag “*mettre une robe n’est pas un crime*” (wearing a skirt is not crime).⁴⁹ In Egypt, the public harassment of women has been a feminist grievance since at least 2006, when serious abuses against women took place during the Eid al-Fitr celebration; in response, the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights formed an anti-harassment campaign. After the 2011 political revolution, and especially in the aftermath of assaults against female protesters, Egyptian activists launched several initiatives to highlight and end the problem. HarassMap was actually launched in late 2010 but gained momentum later, when volunteers joined to create an interactive website and three-step intervention model (see <https://harassmap.org/en/>). Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia all have seen prominent campaigns online and offline opposing violence and harassment.⁵⁰

In Turkey in 2020, more than 300 women’s rights organizations announced the establishment of the Women’s Platform for Equality, known by its Turkish acronym EŞİK (Eşitlik İçin Kadın Platformu), to challenge the right-wing and anti-feminist turn in Turkey’s government and its president. EŞİK partnered with organizations in other countries and issued a transnational Declaration demanding commitment to gender equality. The Declaration was endorsed by the European Women’s Lobby, which itself includes numerous organizations. EŞİK and its transnational collaborators translated the Declaration to reach women’s groups in other regions for purposes of action, solidarity, and regional and global collaborations.⁵¹

In Iran, where public marches and rallies can be dangerous, feminists have taken to the internet and social media to diffuse their message, as with the Feminist School, or to defy cultural restrictions. Indeed, Iranian feminists have faced such restriction, surveillance, and harassment that many have left the country and continue their activism online from abroad. Feminists still in Iran continue to defy state-mandated dress codes with online postings, as well as GPS apps that permit evasion of Morality Police checkpoints. Activists at home and in the diaspora post unveiled photos of themselves moving in public space (see <http://mystealthyfreedom.net/en/>). An audacious initiative is the regular “White Wednesday” display of removing *hejab* in public places in Tehran and distributing the videos online.

When protests broke out in Iraq in 2019, women activists used Twitter to help mobilize compatriots for political reform and improvements in women’s legal status and social positions. For this, some were targeted for assassination, but a positive result was an increase in women’s parliamentary representation following the 2021 elections.⁵²

The public visibility of such activist women discussed above, their initiatives, and their agile use of social media are indicative of the socio-cultural changes that have occurred, the

⁴⁹ Morocco World News, “Moroccan Women Wear Mini-Skirts in Protest against Arrest of Two Women,” June 27, 2015.

⁵⁰ See Ursula Lindsey, “Me Too in Egypt and Morocco,” *The New York Review of Books* (April 8, 2021): 59–62.

⁵¹ Zehra F. Kabasakal Arat, “Women’s Struggle in Turkey and a New Transnational Declaration,” *Wilson Center*. December 31, 2020.

⁵² MADRE, “Report on Human Rights Violations against Women and Girls in Iraq,” May 29, 2020; Iraqi women’s parliamentary share increased to nearly 30 percent. See <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=11&year=2021>.

extent to which women have entered the public sphere, and the ways in which they act both within and outside the state to express grievances, claim rights, and seek legal, policy, and normative change.

WHITHER THE FEMINIST AGENDA? CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The feminist story in MENA is decidedly not one of linear, uninterrupted progress—far from it; there have been setbacks, backlashes, and reversals. As scholars have noted, social movements can endure over long periods of time, “cycling through higher and lower levels of mobilization,” including periods of retrenchment and hibernation.⁵³ Strong opposition to women’s equality and autonomy emanates from religio-conservative forces and from governments. Turkey has seen regression since 2010, and in the most egregious example, in March 2021, the Erdoğan government withdrew from the 2011 Istanbul Convention on Violence Against Women.⁵⁴ In Saudi Arabia, the absolutist ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman lifted the ban on women’s driving, but at the same time his police arrested Loujain al-Hathloul, Aziza al-Yousef, Eman al-Nafjan and at least eight others linked to the Saudi women’s rights movement.⁵⁵ Equal inheritance for women has yet to become law in Tunisia or elsewhere.

Whereas in most Western countries, and also in many Global South democracies, publics are in favor of sex equality, women in leadership roles, and women in the workforce, the MENA publics are not yet fully on board. Data from both the World Values Survey and the Arab Barometer show that women’s values are more liberal than men’s, but even so they do not compare with the emancipatory values of women in, for example, Latin America. Many MENA citizens remain very conservative, casting votes for Islamist parties in those countries with political pluralism. Despite the limitations and setbacks, MENA feminists have an impressive record of projects, concerns, campaigns, coalitions, and achievements. Over time and place, these have been carried out and won through varied mobilizational strategies and frames.

Future research might examine more closely, through comparative and country studies alike, specific issues around which Islamist and secular activists coalesce, how such coalitions emerge, and cycles of cooperation and contention. Given the many conflicts in the region, research also is needed on women’s peace and anti-war movements and their capacity for links to anti-militarist TFNs such as the US-based Code Pink: Women for Peace and the Women’s

⁵³ Nancy Whittier, “Political Generations, Micro-Cohorts, and the Transformation of Social Movements,” *American Sociological Review* 62:5 (1997): 760; Verta Taylor, “Social Movement Continuity: The Women’s Movement in Abeyance,” *American Sociological Review* 54:5 (1989), 772.

⁵⁴ Yesim Arat, “Democratic Backsliding and the Instrumentalization of Women’s Rights in Turkey,” *Politics & Gender* (August 2021): 1–31; see also Gul Aldikacti Marshall, “Turkey’s Anti-Abortion Stance Could Risk Its Future Relations with the EU,” *LSE blogs, European Policy and Politics*, 2012. <http://bit.ly/OCgAC9>.

⁵⁵ The Saudi women were detained as part of a broader crackdown in May 2018, accused—in a “smear campaign” on social media and state-linked media outlets—of being traitors to the state and collaborating with “foreign entities.” See Human Rights Watch, “Saudi Arabia: Growing Crackdown on Women’s Rights Activists,” May 23, 2018. www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/23/saudi-arabia-growing-crackdown-womens-rights-activists.

International League for Peace and Freedom. Last but not least, the globalized neoliberal capitalist era has seen a widening of class and income inequalities. How do MENA activists address them? Research could examine the extent to which feminists frame their arguments and propose policies in language that is both class-based and gender-based, thus resonating with wider publics and attracting more support.

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8. The political system in Iran: theocratic electoral authoritarianism

Shahram Akbarzadeh and Arif Saba

INTRODUCTION

The political system in the Islamic Republic of Iran is structured in a unique way that combines elements of a modern Islamic theocracy with democracy. It is designed to combine *popular sovereignty* and *divine sovereignty*. As part of its commitment to popular sovereignty, Iran holds public elections for the parliament (*majles*), the president and the Assembly of Experts (*Majles-e Khobregan*). The divine sovereignty, on the other hand, is represented by a network of unelected, yet most powerful, institutions controlled by the Supreme Leader. The unelected divine institutions exercise immense power over institutions of representation. The chapter explores this dynamic and argues that divine institutions serve as institutions of manipulation and domination. They are set up as systems of checks and balances to control and ensure that nominally democratic institutions do not challenge the unelected institutions of divine sovereignty. Institutions of representation, on the other hand, are set up to channel the opposition and give concessions to societal pluralism. Elections, therefore, enable the regime to claim that the Islamic Republic is both legitimate and popular. The regime utilises democratic rituals and electoral processes to reinforce authoritarianism. We theorise the Islamic Republic as a *theocratic electoral authoritarian system* such that the regime relies on elections and democratic rituals as instruments to reinforce an essentially authoritarian system. Although such instrumentalisation of democratic rituals has continued to benefit the regime, for example by enabling it to claim a degree of legitimacy and popularity, the chapter also points to some of the adverse consequences and risks to the regime.

To advance the arguments set out above, after this introduction, the first main section of the chapter provides an overview of the political system in Iran. Building on this, in the second section we examine divine and electoral institutions, their interactions and the power dynamics between the two. The third section examines elections' benefits and risks to the regime. It highlights the ways in which the regime utilises elections and institutions of representation to reinforce authoritarianism. It also points to some of the adverse consequences and risks associated with elections and their implications for the regime's legitimacy and popularity. The final section argues that in such an authoritarian context, elections are a double-edged sword. Striking a balance between their risks and benefits is not an easy task. There are instances where elections and democratic rituals reveal the increasing unpopularity of the regime and challenge claims of popular legitimacy.

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IN IRAN

The political system in Iran has been structured in a unique way. It cannot be categorised either as a full theocracy or a democracy. Rather, it operates with a 'dual system' that combines elements of a modern Islamic theocracy with democracy.¹ On the one hand, it is an Islamic state or a theocracy that upholds the sovereignty of God. Islam bestows upon the state divine legitimacy, where all laws and government policy must adhere to the Shi'a interpretation of the *shari'a*. This divine source of legitimacy is enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which acknowledges the 'sovereignty of Qur'anic justice'. *Velāyat-e faqīh*, or the Guardianship of the Religious Jurists, represents divine sovereignty. On the other hand, Iran's political system also recognises the idea of the sovereignty of the people and thus makes it a republic. In other words, the Iranian political system is a combination of *popular sovereignty* and *divine sovereignty*. This dual system of divine sovereignty and popular sovereignty forms two important sources of legitimacy for political authority. As part of its commitment to popular sovereignty, Iran holds public elections for the parliament (*majles*), the president and the Assembly of Experts (*Majles-e Khobregan*). The divine sovereignty, on the other hand, is represented by a network of unelected, yet most powerful, institutions controlled by the Supreme Leader.

In the literature, a range of nomenclature has been used to capture the core of such political systems: illiberal democracy, semi-democracy, democracy as deception and phantom democracy.² Such an unconventional political system is also categorised as a hybrid regime – a political system that plays the game of representative elections,³ or electoral authoritarianism, which refers to regimes that

play the game of multiparty elections by holding regular elections for the chief executive and a national legislative assembly. Yet they violate the liberal-democratic principles of freedom and fairness so profoundly and systematically as to render elections instruments of authoritarian rule rather than 'instruments of democracy'.⁴

Whatever typologies one applies, they all refer to using democratic rituals and institutions to boost the rule of authoritarian regimes. In the Iranian case, the central role of religion makes this combination even more complicated. The political system in the Islamic Republic of Iran is purported to rest on two pillars: religious and popular sovereignty. As noted, Islam bestows upon the state divine legitimacy, and elections (and other institutions of representation) grant it popular legitimacy. The state is theorised both as divine and popular; thus the idea of an

¹ Shahram Akbarzadeh, 'Where Is the Islamic Republic of Iran Heading?' *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 59:1 (2005): 25–38 at 25.

² Mehran Kamrava and Houchang Hassan-Yari, 'Suspended Equilibrium in Iran's Political System', *The Muslim World* 94:4 (2004): 506. Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014). Mehran Kamrava, *Revolution in Iran: The Roots of Turmoil* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Akbarzadeh, 'Where Is the Islamic Republic of Iran Heading?'

³ On hybrid regimes, see: Matthijs Bogaards, 'How to Classify Hybrid Regimes? Defective Democracy and Electoral Authoritarianism', *Democratization* 16:2 (2009): 399–423. On competitive electoral authoritarianism, see: Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, 'Elections without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy* 13:2 (2002): 51–65.

⁴ Andreas Schedler, ed. *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 3.

Islamic Republic. The sacred element is consolidated through institutions such as the Supreme Leader and the Guardians Council. The democratic element is represented by the popular vote and electoral institutions.

In such a structure of power, as illustrated in Figure 8.1, the divine institutions always have the upper hand over the electoral institutions. For example, the non-elected Guardians Council can disqualify candidates and vet and reject laws passed by the parliament. In the same way, the Supreme Leader can dismiss the president.

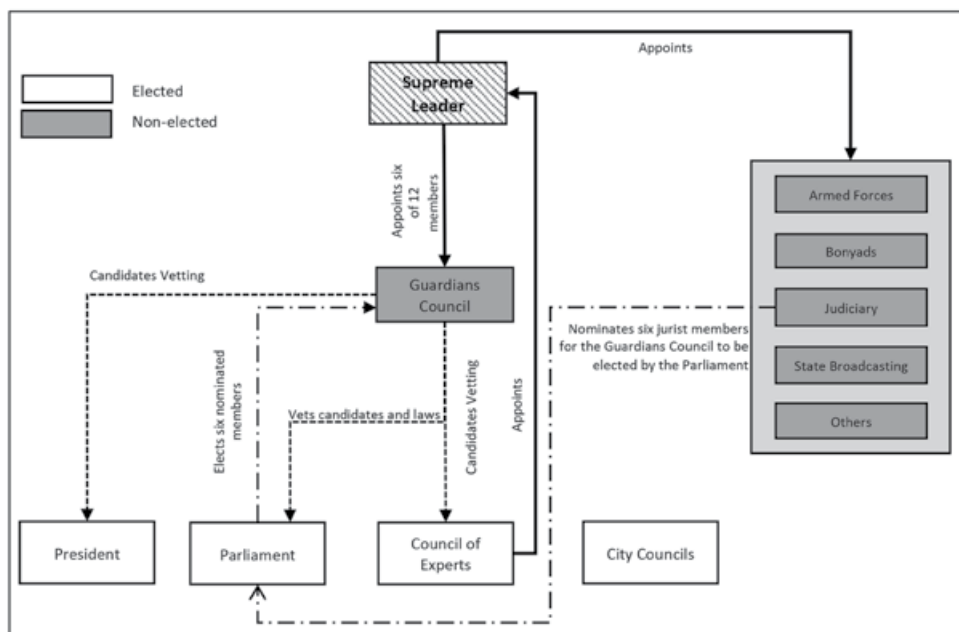


Figure 8.1 *The structure of power in the Islamic Republic of Iran*

This hierarchy has been enshrined in the Constitution through a system of checks and balances to ensure that divine authority is never overshadowed by popular will. To the extent that popular sovereignty is subordinated to divine sovereignty, the Islamic Republic of Iran can be theorised as a theocratic electoral authoritarian system, whereby it uses elections as an instrument of authoritarian rule to reinforce its theocratic authoritarianism.

DIVINE VERSUS ELECTORAL INSTITUTIONS

Divine Institutions

The political system in Iran is designed in such a way that the divine and elected institutions work side by side. In such a dual system, divine sovereignty is represented by unelected institutions such as the Supreme Leader and the Guardians Council. The Supreme Leader, as

an unelected head of state, is the highest religious authority with overarching power over all state institutions. The Supreme Leader is Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and can declare war or peace. He also appoints the head of the judiciary; the Chief of the Joint Staff; senior commanders of the armed forces; six members of the 12-member Guardian Council; the head of the state broadcasting company, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB); the head and members of the Expediency (*maslaha*) Discernment Council; and the heads of several other powerful institutions. He is also vested with the authority, as per Article 110 of the Constitution, to accept the election of the president and the power to indirectly dismiss the president. Overall, the Supreme Leader has the final say on all matters, domestic and international.

The Guardian Council is another unelected powerful institution representing divine sovereignty. The Council consists of 12 theologians and legal experts. The six theologians are appointed by the Supreme Leader and six jurists are nominated by the judiciary and approved by parliament. The Guardian Council is tasked with approving all bills passed by parliament. The Council has veto power over the bills such that no bill becomes law unless it has the Council's approval. This is to ensure the consistency of parliamentary legislation with Islamic law and the Constitution. As per Article 99 of the Constitution, all elections, except for municipal council elections, are to be held under the supervision of the Guardian Council and require its endorsement. As such, the Council supervises the elections and can bar candidates from standing in elections to parliament, the presidency and the Assembly of Experts. Over the past 40 years, the Council has disqualified more than 80 per cent of presidential nominees, including influential figures such as Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in 2013, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2017 and Ali Larijani in 2021.⁵ In the same way, in the February 2004 election the Council disqualified some 2,500 candidates, including some of the most popular sitting parliamentarians seeking re-election, among them Mohammad Reza Khatami – brother of the president, and head of the reformist Islamic Participation Front.⁶ These extensive constitutional powers make the Council one of the main instruments of the Supreme Leader's control over the elected bodies, and an institutional barrier to democracy. Sitting at the top of the power hierarchy, these unelected institutions are there to ensure that divine sovereignty is not overshadowed by popular will, to contain the significance of elections and to manage their impact within the power structure.

Electoral Institutions

All Iranian citizens over 18 years old, regardless of their religion, ethnicity or political view, are eligible to vote. Religious minorities such as Zorostrarians, Jews and Chaldo-Assyrian Catholics have a quota in the *majles*. Each of them has one representative and other Christians have two representatives. Baha'is are not mentioned in the Constitution; there is also no offi-

⁵ William Samii, 'Iran's Guardian Council as an Obstacle to Democracy,' *The Middle East Journal* 55:4 (2001); and Foroud Shirvani, 'The role of the Guardian Council in the Constitution of Iran', *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee/Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* 43:2 (2010). On the Iranian electoral system in general, see: Yasmin Alem, *Duality by Design: The Iranian Electoral System* (Washington, DC: International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2011).

⁶ ABC News, 'Iran Votes in Election Likely to Favour Hardliners', 21 February 2004.

cial law against them. They nonetheless face frequent and systemic persecution, which has resulted in an exodus and a significant dwindling of the Baha'i population in Iran.

Women have been allowed to vote and stand for public office in Iran since the White Revolution in 1962. This was despite fierce opposition from the clergy, including Khomeini at the time. Although the 1979 revolution which brought the Islamic Republic into power did not affect the rights of women to vote, the office of the president continues to be reserved for men. For example, Article 115 of the Constitution requires the president to be among Iran's religious and political '*rijal*', which literally means 'men' but in some contexts could also denote a gender-neutral 'mankind'. The Guardian Council has not taken any official stance on this article. However, in past elections ever since the 1979 revolution, the Council has disqualified all female presidential nominees, without citing gender as a cause.

Since the 1979 revolution there have been 38 national elections in Iran: 11 parliamentary elections, 13 presidential elections, 6 Assembly of Experts elections, 5 municipal council elections and 3 referendums. Despite the dominant role of religion and divine institutions, the share of clerics in the *majles* has been consistently declining. For example, at its highest, in 1984, clerics formed 56 per cent of the *majles*; in 2016, the share of clerics declined to 6 per cent. In the 2020 parliament this number spiked to 31 per cent, which could be due to historically low voter participation. Women have had a meagre share in the parliament, with less than 1.5 per cent in the first three parliaments and with irregular variations between around 3 per cent and 6 per cent.⁷

According to the Constitution, there are only four institutions whose members are elected by direct popular vote. They included the president, the parliament (*majles*), the Assembly of Experts (*majles-e khobregan*) and municipal councils. These electoral institutions are designed to work alongside the divine institutions. Before they can officially start campaigning, all candidates must be vetted and endorsed by the Guardians Council.

The president is elected by popular vote for a four-year term and a maximum of two consecutive terms. Article 115 of the Constitution stipulates the requirements for the president as being male, holding Iranian citizenship, exhibiting good character, having a reputation of religiosity and piety and maintaining a commitment to the foundations of the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁸ All presidential candidates have to be vetted and approved by the Guardian Council. As noted above, not all candidates get passed through this process.

Another key elected institution is the parliament or *majles*. It is composed of 290 members. The *majles* is vested with the power of legislation and the power to impeach the president. However, all legislation passed by the parliament has to be approved by the Guardians Council. In the same way, the decision to impeach the president is also dependent on the approval of the Supreme Leader.

The Assembly of Experts is a key elected institution. It consists of 88 mujtahids or religious authorities. Before running for election, all its members are first carefully vetted and approved

⁷ See: Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosh Rahimkhani, *Postrevolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook* (New York: Syracuse University Press), 255–9.

⁸ Article 117 'Iran (Islamic Republic of)'s Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989', *Constitute Project*, available at www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf?lang=en. The Law of the Presidential Elections of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1985) and the Law of Supervision of the Guardians Council on the Presidential Elections of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1985) deal with presidential elections.

by the Guardians Council. This vetting process effectively excludes reformists or critics. It is Iran's only constitutional body with the power, as stipulated in Articles 107 and 111 of the Constitution, to appoint the Supreme Leader, supervise his capabilities and performance and dismiss him if he is unable to perform his duties. For all its powers, the Assembly has never seriously questioned or challenged the actions of the two Supreme Leaders who have led Iran since the 1979 revolution.⁹

ELECTIONS REINFORCE AUTHORITARIANISM

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a particular type of electoral authoritarianism, one that has the clear trappings of a theocracy. As Andreas Schedler has argued, electoral authoritarian regimes develop a sophisticated set of institutions, which he calls *institutions of domination*, *institutions of representation*, and *institutions of manipulation*.¹⁰ Violence, resources and ideology are the main tools of domination, wielded by repressive institutions, economic institutions, and ideological institutions. Institutions of representation, on the other hand, are set up to channel the opposition and give concessions to societal pluralism. These institutions are designed in different forms and shapes, depending on their historical background. Lastly, institutions of manipulation are set up to control the representational institutions. Electoral authoritarian regimes devise a repertoire of manipulation, a set of institutional tools to 'make sure that the *nominally democratic* institutions they set up remain *substantively authoritarian*'. If they are adopting some form of representative legislature, authoritarian regimes make sure that they complement it with 'the menu of legislative manipulation', which may consist of disempowerment, agent control and fragmentation.¹¹

Applied to the case of Iran, this translates into extensive power bestowed upon the non-elected institutions dominating the electoral institutions or institutions of representation. This is illustrated in the veto power of the non-elected Guardian Council on all laws passed by the parliament. This effectively prevents any meaningful legal change as the Guardian Council rejects the passing of any law that constrains the power of the ruling clergy. In other realms too, the regime designs relevant tools of manipulation, including judicial manipulation, local manipulation, media manipulation and association manipulation. An important way through which the regime exercises domination and manipulation is the use of reserved positions and domains. The Supreme Leader and the significant institutions and resources under his control are out of the scope of elections. The most significant of these institutions, among others, include senior positions in the armed forces; the state broadcasting company (IRIB), which has a monopoly on broadcasting in Iran; and the judiciary. The Supreme Leader also controls a massive economic empire consisting of tens of funds, trusts and holdings under several institutions, such as Bonyad-e Mostazafan, Execution of Imam's Order, Astan-e Qods-e Razavi

⁹ See: Akbarzadeh, 'Where Is the Islamic Republic of Iran Heading?'; Akbarzadeh, 'Democracy Promotion versus Engagement with Iran', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 41:3 (2011).

¹⁰ Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 25–69; Schedler, 'Elections without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation', *Journal of Democracy* 13:2 (2002): 36–50.

¹¹ Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty*; Schedler, ed., *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006); and Schedler, 'Elections without Democracy'.

and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) companies. Together they are estimated to control the lion's share of Iran's economy. The Islamic Republic of Iran manipulates the very normative and democratic premise by effectively moving key positions of the state outside the domain of popular choice.

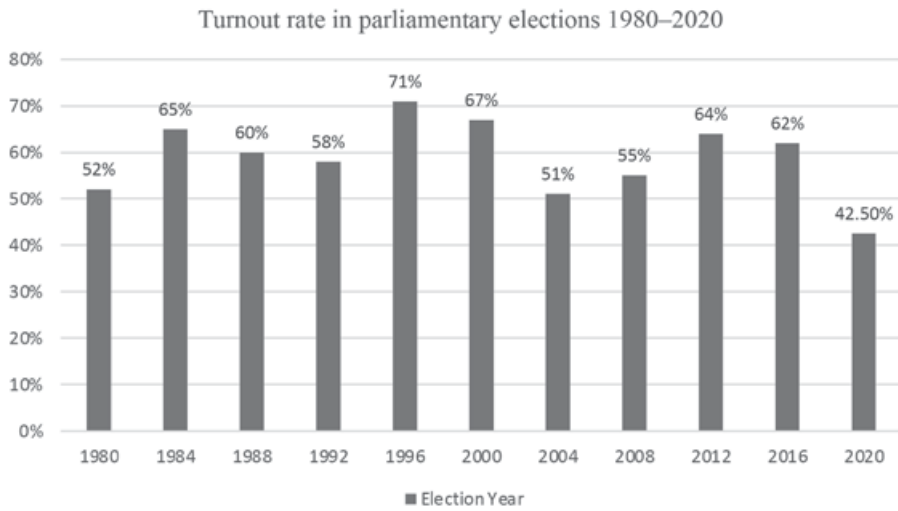
The Benefits and Risks of Elections

Through the establishment of a sophisticated system of domination and manipulation, the Islamic Republic of Iran seeks to keep in check institutions of representation and to ensure they do not challenge the existing power structure. The fact that the system allows elections and institutions of representation to work alongside powerful non-elected institutions is a calculated risk to derive political legitimacy. The electoral process has come to represent the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. The official view confers significant meaning upon the act of popular voting. Electoral participation is seen as an act of popular endorsement of the political system as a whole. Even the Supreme Leader has gone on the record to encourage electoral participation regardless of voters' political affiliations and preferences. The regime seeks to portray the Islamic Republic as popular and legitimate by reaping the benefits of an electoral system while curtailing and managing the risks that are often associated with an electoral system. More fundamentally, the regime uses elections to reinforce its authoritarian political system. This cynical exercise benefits the regime in at least three ways. First, it provides the regime with domestic and international legitimacy. In a world where democracy is a key pillar of legitimacy, the most visible benefit of elections is their function of providing the regime with a popular mandate. Domestically, the Islamic Republic often portrays elections as evidence of its popular support amid sustained international pressures. For example, during the 2017 presidential election, which had a 73 per cent voter turnout rate, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei declared that 'the winners of the election are the people of Iran and the Islamic Republic'.¹² Ever since the 1979 revolution the turnout rate has been consistently high, in both presidential and parliamentary elections, as shown in Figures 8.2 and 8.3. The voter turnout rate is often seen as proof of popular support – a logic that is shared by both the regime and the opposition. The exceptions were the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2020 and 2021, which recorded a turnout rate of 42.5 per cent and 48.8 per cent, respectively, of eligible voters – the lowest-ever turnout rates in the history of the Islamic Republic.

Considering turnout rate as a marker of popular support, different opposition groups interpreted this low turnout rate as a sign of a lack of legitimacy and popular support for the regime.¹³ Given the centrality of participation rates as an important marker of popularity and legitimacy, the regime has gradually shifted its framing of elections to keep the electorate engaged. In the early revolutionary years, the regime predominantly framed participation in elections as a religious duty. However, in recent years more emphasis has been placed on its secular aspects. For example, in the 2020 parliamentary election Supreme Leader Ali

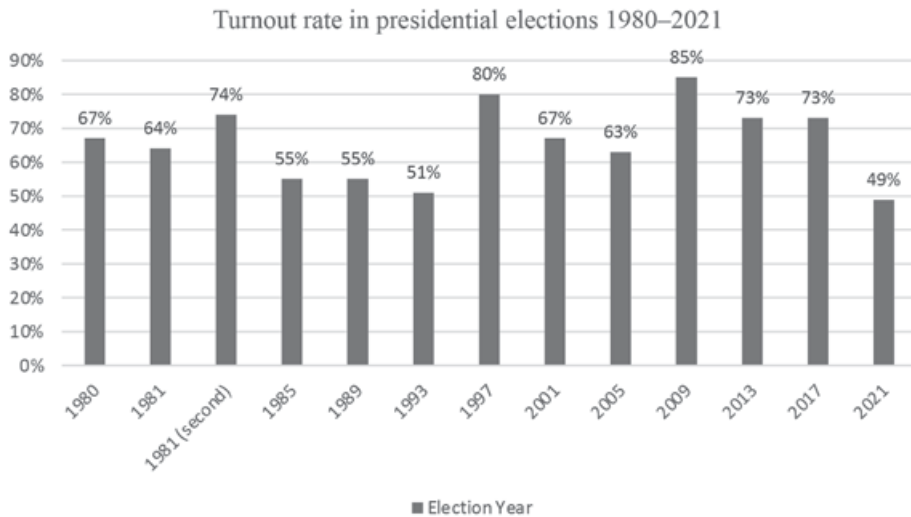
¹² Ali Khamenei, 'The Winners of the Election are the People of Iran and the Islamic Republic' [online], *Supreme Leader's Office of Information Service*. 2017, available: <http://bit.ly/2qZ6O7E>.

¹³ For a few examples see: *DW News*, '11th Parliamentary Elections and Record "Lowest Turnout"', 24 March 2019, available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/3YEL8>; and *Radio Farda*, 'What Is the Message of Low Turnout in the Second Round of Parliamentary Elections?' 15 September 2020, available at: www.radiofarda.com/a/30837923.html.



Source: United States Institute of Peace, *The Iran Primer: Trends in Parliamentary Elections 1980–2016*, 30 January 2020, available: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/jan/30/trends-parliamentary-elections>.

Figure 8.2 Parliamentary elections turnout rates



Source: United States Institute of Peace, *The Iran Primer: Trends in Parliamentary Elections 1980–2016*, 30 January 2020, available: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/jan/30/trends-parliamentary-elections>.

Figure 8.3 Presidential elections turnout rates

Khamenei encouraged people to vote because it is a 'civil right' that guarantees 'national interests', and only secondarily added the ritualistic phrase that "it is *also* a religious duty".¹⁴ This shift in framing aims to encourage greater participation in elections which then enables the regime to claim that the Islamic Republic is popular and legitimate.¹⁵

Second, elections serve as a safety valve for the regime, especially for the divine and the theocratic elements of the system, in several ways. They enable the regime to shift the blame for policy failures, both domestically and internationally, onto the elected officials. In other words, elected officials provide the unelected ruling elite with the necessary scapegoats in times of difficulty. In this way the elected officials usually bear the blame for both domestic and foreign policy failures in policy, as they are the most visible face of the regime in the eyes of the citizenry and most accountable to voters. This is not to say that Iranians are not aware of the way the system works, but only to argue that elected official level is the only level of government at which criticism in the form of voter backlash is tolerated. However, boycotting elections is considered highly dangerous to both elected and unelected officials, and therefore voting in itself is a politically charged act.

The theatre and ritual of elections, however defective, are also conceived as partial remedies to rising public expectations and demands. It opens up some space for the expression of opposition and discontent which in turn fends off public pressure on the ruling clergy. The ritual of elections not only gives hope for change and betterment of conditions by the elected officials but also reduces the threat of sudden outbursts of violent discontent and radicalisation of opposition to the regime. Even if elections do not lead to any meaningful change, they still benefit the regime as they discharge the opposition's energies in a peaceful way, thus avoiding any threat to the regime through violent outbursts. In this way, greater participation and higher turnout rates in relatively heated and competitive elections not only provide the regime with greater legitimacy and popularity but also deflate and divert the accumulation of public pressure aimed at the ruling clergy.

A different aspect of the safety valve is that elected officials are the first to face public dissatisfaction, protecting the inner circle of unelected leaders. Following the 2018 US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal and the subsequent imposition of sanctions, Iran's economy was on the verge of collapse. The economic crisis brought thousands of Iranians to the streets, where they chanted slogans against Supreme Leader Khamenei and the government of Hassan Rouhani, questioning the Islamic Republic's legitimacy. The Supreme Leader shifted the blame for both failures onto the government of Hassan Rouhani. 'The main reason for the sharp decline in the value of the Iranian currency was the government's performance' and 'serious mismanagement in policy-making and controlling the market', Khamenei stated during a speech in August 2018.¹⁶ In relation to the collapse of the Iranian nuclear deal, he similarly stated that although 'it was [his] mistake to allow negotiations with America' in the

¹⁴ *Tasnim News*, '2019 Parliamentary Elections | Supreme Leader: Elections Guarantee National Interests and the Day of Civil Rights of the Nation', 21 February 2020, available at: <https://tn.ai/2207146>.

¹⁵ Mahmood Pargoo and Shahram Akbarzadeh, *Presidential Elections in Iran: Islamic Realism since the Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹⁶ *Radio Farda*, 'Khamenei Blames Rouhani for Economic Crisis, Forbids Negotiating with U.S.', 13 August 2018, available at: <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-khamenei-blames-rouhani-forbids-negotiating-with-us/29430488.html>. See also *Agence France-Presse*, 'Iran Supreme Leader Says "Wrong Decisions" Have Hurt Economy', 30 January 2022, available at: www.voanews.com/a/iran-supreme-leader-says-wrong-decisions-have-hurt-economy/6418861.html.

first place, nonetheless the Iranian negotiating team had ‘crossed the redlines’¹⁷ he had ‘set for negotiations’ with the West.¹⁸ In this way, it is the elected officials who are ultimately blamed for such policy failures, thus protecting and shielding the divine and theocratic elements of the system.

Third, elections function as early warning systems. In authoritarian systems, there is little space for free expression of views and information. In such a closed context, authoritarian rulers generally suffer from informational uncertainty. Elections, as barometers of public opinion, are therefore seen as a cost-effective solution to such ‘politics of uncertainty’ or informational uncertainty.¹⁹ Elections provide insights into how the general public views and evaluates the state’s policies and values. In this sense, elections function as *early warning systems* by providing the ruling clergy with precious time for planning and responding to imminent crises as well as reducing informational uncertainty. For example, as noted, in the 2021 presidential election the voter turnout rate was 48.8 per cent, the lowest ever registered in the Islamic Republic. More importantly, the number of spoiled ballots or protest votes was also the highest, at around 3.7 million or about 12 per cent of the total – a record high compared with an average of 2 per cent in previous elections.²⁰ Analysts interpreted this both as ‘a resounding rejection of the entire establishment – hard-line or moderate – by a majority of Iranians’ and as ‘strip[ping] the Islamic republic of its ability to leverage voter turnout as proof of its legitimacy, especially to the outside world’.²¹ The conservative daily *Jomhuri Eslami* noted that those who believe in the system cannot be indifferent to this ‘bitter reality’ and called on the Islamic establishment to ‘act in order not to lose the support of the people’.²² Likewise, the former reformist President Mohammad Khatami saw this as cause for alarm, stating that the low turnout and high percentage of invalid votes were signs ‘of people’s frustration and despair and their distance from the establishment that should alarm everyone’.²³ The 2021 election is an indication of the growing disconnect between the public and the Islamic Republic and, as such, serves as an early warning to the ruling clergy.

Lastly, elections and institutions of representation benefit the Islamic Republic in preventing the radicalisation of opposition. In an authoritarian system, there is little or no space for the opposition to express dissent or protest. Given the lack of space for dissent, opposition groups

¹⁷ Khamenei’s ‘redlines’ for the negotiating team, as he put them during a speech in November 2013: ‘I insist on the acceptance of the rights of the Iranian nation including the nuclear rights. I believe that we should not yield the nuclear rights of our nation even one iota. Of course, we do not enter into details of these negotiations. There is a red line and a limit. This limit should be observed. I mentioned this point to the authorities and they are obliged to observe this limit’: see Suzanne Maloney, ‘As Nuclear Talks Inch Forward, Iran’s Supreme Leader Tacks Right with a Blistering Speech’, *Brookings Institution*, 22 November 2013, available at: www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2013/11/22/as-nuclear-talks-inch-forward-irans-supreme-leader-tacks-right-with-a-blistering-speech/.

¹⁸ *Radio Farda*, ‘Khamenei Blames Rouhani for Economic Crisis’.

¹⁹ Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty*, 25.

²⁰ Garretta Nada, ‘Raisi: Election Results Explainer’, United States Institute of Peace, 23 June 2021, available at: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/jun/23/raisi-election-results-explainer>.

²¹ See Golnaz Esfandiari, ‘Voters Send a Message to Iran’s Leaders after Dismal Turnout for Presidential Election,’ *RFE/RL*, 22 June 2021, available at: www.rferl.org/a/iran-turnout-message-leaders/31320904.html.

²² Esfandiari, ‘Voters Send a Message to Iran’s Leaders’.

²³ Esfandiari, ‘Voters Send a Message to Iran’s Leaders’.

are ‘standing invitations to rebel’, which can lead to uncertainty and instability.²⁴ In such a context, the ruling clergy rely on elections and institutions of representation as a mechanism to prevent radicalisation and outbursts of opposition to the regime. This is mainly carried out by the co-optation of moderate opposition through power-sharing and separating them from the more radical anti-regime opposition groups. The moderate opposition groups are mostly those reformists and other non-conservative political groups who are willing to compromise and practise within the existing constitutional framework, without challenging or upsetting the existing power structure. The radical opposition groups, in contrast, are those that typically pursue political agendas beyond the constitutional framework and seek to challenge the ruling clergy. By giving space to moderate opposition to compete for office through elections, these opposition groups become loyal to the entirety of the political system. The Guardians Council, through its vetting and approval power, plays a significant role in buying loyalty from these groups. Although a significant domain of the state and key positions are kept outside of the electoral system, there are still elected offices with political and financial power for which moderate opposition groups are willing to compromise and make political concessions in order to be included within the existing power structure. This mutual compromise is a win-win game for both the ruling clergy and the moderate opposition. By agreeing to the fundamental policies of the ruling clergy and working within existing structures of power, the opposition gains access to the resources of the state, which in turn provides the regime with the much-valued asset of legitimacy. More fundamentally, this mutual compromise in the form of limited power-sharing prevents the moderate opposition from being transformed into radical and anti-regime forces. This mechanism of compromise has proven more effective not only for the ruling clergy to fend off threats emanating from the opposition, but also for the opposition. Outright opposition to the ruling clergy has often resulted in the opposition losing its relevance and becoming an outcast in the political scene. They are either forced into exile or become outlawed groups within the country.

The fate of opposition groups such as the Green Movement is illustrative here. During the 2009 presidential election the two candidates, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi, disputed the election results, leading to violent protests. Dubbed as the Green Movement, the unrest continued for over a year and rattled the country. The regime brutally suppressed the movement and placed the leaders of the Movement, Mousavi and Karubi, under house arrest (which remains the case at the time of writing). The opposition leaders are effectively eliminated from the political scene.

Regarding the more radical and anti-regime opposition groups, the regime utilises its numerous institutions of domination and manipulation to prevent their election. The Guardian Council, with the power to disqualify candidates, is one such institution that essentially serves as a gatekeeper in this process. For example, in the 2020 parliamentary election, out of more than 14,000 people who registered to run for parliament, the Guardian Council disqualified as many as 9,000 people.²⁵ Similarly, during the 2021 presidential election, of 585 hopefuls the

²⁴ Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty*, 25.

²⁵ Nasser Karimi, ‘Iran Disqualifies Thousands from Running for Parliament’, *Associated Press News*, 14 January 2020, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/44ad5910fa3e1a297d6c0b5ad6c3c59f>.

Council qualified only 7 candidates, none of them a prominent moderate or reformist, to run in the presidential election.²⁶

In this way, elections and institutions of representation benefit the authoritarian rulers to resolve, what Gandhi calls, ‘two basic problems of governance’ they face: the need to prevent threats and challenges to their rule as well as to solicit the cooperation of those whom they rule.²⁷ To thwart threats and solicit cooperation, it is fundamental that both authoritarian rulers and the opposition are willing to make concessions and compromise. Authoritarian rulers must make concessions, for example, in the form of limited power-sharing with the opposition and giving them access to state resources, wealth, and power. The opposition, too, must be willing to compromise to support rather than usurp the status quo, for example by agreeing to work within the existing power structure and give up on their radical goal of thwarting the ruling regime. This mutual compromise between the rulers and the opposition is fundamental to the successful co-optation of moderate opposition, which in turn reduces the radicalisation of the opposition and contributes to the longevity of the regime.²⁸ It is here that elections and institutions of representation serve as an important forum through which authoritarian rulers and opposition can organise policy compromises. As Gandhi has argued, ‘nominally democratic institutions’ such as legislatures and parties

serve as a forum in which the regime and opposition can announce their policy preferences and forge agreements. For the potential opposition, assemblies and parties provide an institutionalized channel through which they can affect decision-making even if in limited policy realms. For incumbents, these institutions are a way in which opposition demands can be contained and answered without appearing weak.²⁹

In this way, the Islamic Republic uses elections and institutions of representation as ‘instruments of co-optation’³⁰ whereby the ruling clergy induces the moderate members of the opposition ‘to vest their interests in the status quo [...] [and] offer a vehicle for career advancement within a stable system of patronage’ as well as to control and contain the radicalisation of dissent.³¹ Elections and electoral institutions, however defective they are, benefit the Islamic Republic by contributing to the regime’s longevity, reinforcing authoritarianism, and enabling the regime to claim greater domestic and international legitimacy.

²⁶ Maziar Motamed, ‘Iran’s Guardian Council Disqualifies Most Presidential Hopefuls’, *Al Jazeera*, 25 May 2021, available at: www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/25/irans-guardian-council-disqualifies-most-presidential-candidates.

²⁷ Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 71; and Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, ‘Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion under Dictatorships’, *Economics & Politics* 18:1 (2006): 1–26.

²⁸ See Markus Holdo, ‘Cooptation and Non-Cooptation: Elite Strategies in Response to Social Protest’, *Social Movement Studies* 18:4 (2019): 444–62. Johannes Gerschewski, ‘The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes’, *Democratization* 20:1 (2013): 13–38.

²⁹ Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*, xviii.

³⁰ Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*, xviii. On co-optation see also Holdo, ‘Cooptation and Non-Cooptation’; and Gerschewski, ‘The Three Pillars of Stability’.

³¹ Gerschewski, ‘The Three Pillars of Stability’.

Risks of Elections

Notwithstanding these benefits, elections in an authoritarian context, however controlled and contained, also have their risks, challenges and surprises. Elections in an authoritarian system are a double-edged sword. As much as they are utilised to reinforce authoritarianism, they also come with adverse consequences or risks to the incumbent regime. More specifically, elections may expose the regime to critical instability. Further, in a political system, where hardliner clerics have historically held the dominant position compared to reformists and moderates, holding competitive and meaningful elections may upset the status quo between hardliners and moderates. Ever since the 1979 revolution, there continues to be a tense struggle between reformists and hardliners, be it in the elections for president, parliament or the Council of Experts. The regime has been exposed to these dual challenges time and again. Such risks have manifested themselves in several surprising and unexpected victories of the moderates and reformists over the hardliners.

The regime experienced its first ever electoral shock in the 1997 election, which resulted in a landslide victory for reformist Mohammad Khatami over the Supreme Leader's preferred candidate, Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri. Following this, the reformists also secured a decisive victory in the 2000 parliamentary election, winning 195 out of 290 seats. The reformists' concurrent domination over both legislature and the executive branches effectively upset the status quo by sidelining the hardliners and conservatives. This reformist-dominant parliament created several crises for the regime. For example, the parliament sought to pass a progressive bill meant to amend the previously restrictive press law and freedom of speech. In order to prevent this, Supreme Leader Khamenei had to personally intervene and prevent the bill, which he referred to as illegitimate and 'not in the interest of the system and the revolution', from being debated in the parliament.³² The 2016 election for the Assembly of Experts, likewise, shifted the status quo in favour of the reformists and moderates. The reformists won almost 60 per cent of the seats, compared to holding less than 25 per cent in the previous Assembly. This exposed the regime to some of the downsides of holding competitive elections. It provided the regime and its conservative base with a clear lesson: that it would be better to prevent such electoral shocks and surprises in the first place than to deal with their aftermath.

Elections have also exposed the regime to several unexpected and fatal threats during the past 40-plus years. For example, the relatively free presidential election in 1980 led to the victory of Abolhassan Banisadr, whose open confrontation with the ruling clergy resulted in a period of instability, political turmoil and violence. He was impeached by the parliament and fled the country after being dismissed. The first parliamentary election in the same year, considered the most free of all elections, also posed a serious threat to the regime. The election resulted in the most powerful parliament, split between powerful and diverse factions. This parliament is seen as having been the single most powerful obstacle to the full consolidation of power by the regime during the first years after the revolution.

It is here that the complex set of unelected institutions of domination and manipulation play a preeminent role in thwarting these challenges, ensuring the regime's survival and holding competitive elections to portray the regime as popular and legitimate.

³² Geneive Abdo, 'Iran's Leader Stamps on Freedom', *The Guardian*, 7 August 2000, available at: www.theguardian.com/world/2000/aug/07/iran.

However, such a balancing act is not always easy. The regime continues to struggle in striking a balance between holding elections that are competitive but also produce favourable outcomes by ensuring the victory of candidates favoured by the regime. Two recent examples illustrate the challenges of this delicate balancing act. The 2009 election was the most competitive and heated one, recording an 84 per cent participation rate for eligible voters. With the highest ever turnout rate since the revolution, it was a great victory for the regime as an indication of its popularity and legitimacy. At the same time, this heated election also saw the largest chain of protests since the revolution, known as the Green Movement, which led to a period of domestic unrest and instability. The regime's brutal crackdown on the protests continues to hurt its international image.

Another recent example of this delicate balance between a meaningful election and a favourable outcome for the regime is the 2021 presidential election. As noted previously, the election registered a turnout of just 48.8 per cent of eligible voters, the lowest since the revolution. The turnout rate in the 2020 parliamentary election was also recorded at just 42.5 per cent, also the lowest since the revolution. While these elections produced a favourable outcome for the regime, the low turnout rate significantly exposed the regime's unpopularity and questionable legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. Opposition groups in Iran interpreted the low turnout rate as an indication that the regime is facing a crisis of legitimacy; others saw this as a 'great warning' and 'an alarm bell' to ruling elites, which may eventually lead to an existential challenge for the whole political system.³³

In this way, as much as the ruling clergy utilises elections to reinforce its authoritarian system, striking the right balance between its risks and rewards is not an easy task. Elections also come with adverse consequences to the regime by exposing it to critical instability and questionable legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

The political system in the Islamic Republic of Iran operates with a 'dual system' that combines elements of a modern Islamic theocracy with democracy. In this sense, religion and popular sovereignty are considered the foundation of the political system and important sources of legitimacy. Islam bestows upon the state divine legitimacy, and elections and institutions of representation grant it popular legitimacy. The state is theorised both as divine and popular, thus the idea of an *Islamic Republic*. The divine and sacred elements are consolidated through non-elected, yet most powerful, institutions such as the Supreme Leader and the Guardians Council. The democratic element is represented by the popular vote and elected institutions. As this research has documented, the divine institutions always have the upper hand over the elected institutions. This is to ensure that divine authority is never overshadowed by popular will. To the extent that popular sovereignty is subordinated to divine sovereignty, the Islamic Republic of Iran can therefore be theorised as a *theocratic electoral authoritarian system* whereby it utilises democratic rituals and institutions of representation as instruments to reinforce theocratic authoritarianism. This does not necessarily render elections and institutions of representation totally meaningless. Quite the opposite, this research showed that the ruling

³³ For a few examples see: *DW News*, '11th Parliamentary Elections and Record "Lowest Turnout"', *Radio Farda*, 'What Is the Message of Low Turnout in the Second Round of Parliamentary Elections?'

clergy has continued to give significant importance to democratic rituals, however defective and manipulated they are. The underlying reason for this is that the regime capitalises on heated elections, with high participation rates, to present them as evidence of its legitimacy and as an act of popular endorsement of the entire political system. Although the regime has been reaping the benefits of an electoral system to reinforce its authoritarian rule, this chapter also pointed to some of the adverse consequences of elections, which have exposed the regime to several unexpected and fatal threats during the past 40-plus years. In such a context, elections are a double-edged sword. This is despite the existence of a strong system of checks and balances in the form of powerful, unelected institutions of domination and manipulation to risk-manage election processes. Yet, heated electoral processes can tip the balance of power away from conservatives and hardliners in favour of reformists; electoral disputes and instability (such as public protests in the wake of the 2009 presidential election) can undermine the whole system. Most importantly, the lowest ever turnout rate coupled with the highest ever number of protest votes in the 2021 presidential election turned the regime's narrative about popular legitimacy on its head.

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9. Where is Iranian politics? Between state and nation, inside and outside the polity

Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany

INTRODUCTION

The September 2022 death in custody of Mahsa (Jhina) Amini sparked a nationwide response from young women and their male allies and counterparts – the biggest popular mobilisation in Iran since the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah. Led by young women, thousands took to the streets; the slogan ‘Zan, Zendegi, Azadi’ acquired international recognition and the poignant anthem of the movement, a song by Shirvin Hajipour,¹ won a Grammy award. The dynamics of this mobilisation add new layers to the already complicated nature of Iranian politics, where it is situated and how it is manifested.

Formal politics nowadays is almost always ‘at a distance’. Most politicians are known to the contemporary public via media of one form or another. Few are on the stump any more, talking directly to potential voters; if this does happen it is probably only briefly at public rallies during election times. The television screen mediates the distance between representatives and supporters, bringing politics into the living room – as do radio, newspapers and internet interactions, including through social media.² If there is always a spatial dimension to any and all politics, in the contemporary world the distances have become longer while the speeds are faster. That is to say, long-distance has collapsed into seconds, the time–space compression of globalisation-speak.³ Thus, distance becomes a question of scale. This is all well known but worth repeating, to acknowledge that the claims about the deterritorialisation of politics are really not that new.⁴

And ‘audiences’ do not need to be present within a polity to become interpellated, explicitly or implicitly, by politics. Global audiences can watch and listen to global channels – the BBC, Al Jazeera, Russia Today – and Iran’s own multi-lingual television channels. And nationals living outwith ‘their’ homes are a significant constituency at times of elections and political crises. Sometimes globalising approaches and the perceived thickening of transnational relations ignore the ongoing significance of state–nation relations – a polity speaking to its people, whether living within its territorial borders or beyond – but this remains vital. Indeed, state–nation relations have become deterritorialised in fascinating ways as more and more countries have diasporic populations living outside the boundary of the state, which tries to

¹ See www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpyHuCZzsVA.

² Stephen Coleman, ‘Mediated Politics and Everyday Life’, *International Journal of Communication* 1:1 (2007): 49–60.

³ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

⁴ David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton, ‘Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture’. In *Politics at the Edge*, ed. Chris Pierson and Simon Tormey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 14–28.

maintain their location within the political fold through broadcasting, social media and sheer rhetorical invocation.

But embodied politics almost instantly eliminates distance, as people find themselves on the street directly in front of the forces of repression and the technologies they use. A population armed with little but veils and slogans finds itself confronted with beatings, tear gas, rubber and metal bullets, arrests, imprisonment and death. The spatial distance of formal politics collapses. The state stands in front of our noses.

THREE, PERHAPS FOUR, GEOGRAPHIES OF POLITICS

The conceptual focus of this chapter is the complicated set of relationships between geography and politics in an exilic, diasporic post-revolutionary Iran. There are at least three powerful spatial dynamics currently at work in the analysis of a country's political orbit. One is the classic remit of the international relations between states as political entities. But new approaches to public diplomacy suggest that states are reaching out across geographic borders to address each other's public in unprecedented ways.⁵ One recent example of state interference in others' political processes is the now-acknowledged Russian influence in both the US Trump election process and the British Brexit process. The second is the classic remit of political analysis, the national dialogue – sometimes open, often constrained – between the state and its inhabitants within the country. The third is the space between the state and its citizens who live abroad – as diaspora, exiles, migrants, whatever the label used – in countries beyond its borders. Too often, each is analysed in isolation, part of the intellectually unedifying division of academic work. In addition, to complicate these geographies further, the diaspora can communicate back in various ways while other states and other publics can also become entangled in the conversations.

These spaces overlap in terms of communicative dynamics, even if they describe slightly different sets of actors and agendas. These dynamics are simultaneous, perhaps impacting each other, waxing and waning as the issues change. The nation as an interpellator of people and their political imagination and participation remains strong, so distance does not fully overcome location, and space does not alter the ongoing significance of the place. One cannot fully embrace the arguments about 'the death of distance'⁶ since proximity to the orbit of the state clearly still matters at times. Better put, we might say that the repressive reach of the state is more noticeable and harder to evade within a country – Iran is our focus here – than outside it, but it is also present outside.⁷ We need to think of space and place in tension, even contradiction, all the time, and we need to ask where politics is to be found: within the 'system' or on the streets – as currently in Iran – or, increasingly, online, where dispersion in transnational virtual space means little in regard to the almost instant uploading and reception of shared digital content, both time and space collapsing on our screens. This chapter explores these issues by examining the spatiality of contemporary Iranian politics within and beyond

⁵ Held, McGrew, Goldblatt and Perraton, 'Global Transformations'.

⁶ Frances Cairncross, *The Death of Distance: 2.0: How the Communications Revolution Will Change Our Lives* (London: Texere, 2001).

⁷ The confiscation of London-based BBC Persian personnel's property inside Iran by the Islamic Republic is an egregious example of such state reach.

the country. The fourth dimension upsets the arguments about distance. When a population mobilises in a repressive political environment – as under the Islamic Republic – then distance disappears. The other dimensions still pertain, but the relationship between the people and the state is radically reconfigured. So too is the relationship between people inside a polity and the rest of the world, space transforming into time as digital communication allows for instantaneous connection, albeit that the actual politics on the ground works much more slowly.

Let's explore some arguments. International relations are an obvious form of politics at a distance, involving the system of internationally recognised actors at the level of a state. Two or more political systems interact in a variety of forms, from complex communications to outright war. Iran was entangled in great-power politics with Russia, Britain and others throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸ It is currently embroiled in a number of international conflicts, with a range of countries aligned in opposition to it. Looking merely at Iranian international relations within 'its' region, there are Iranian military personnel on the ground in Syria. It is heavily involved with the political conflict in Yemen. It still enjoys some influence inside Iraq. It has been a vocal supporter of a Palestinian state and a loud critic of Israel. Indeed, tensions between Iran and Israel rarely dissipate and rumble on below the contentious nuclear discussions (JCPOA, discussed below), albeit that Iran is a signatory to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) and eschews the development of such weapons whereas Israel is a known nuclear power and not a signatory to the NPT.⁹ Such are the contradictions of global nuclear management.

Beyond its geographic neighbourhood, Iran has been locked in an antagonistic relationship with the US since the 1979 revolution and hostage crisis that has often only narrowly avoided outright military conflict. The successful negotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the P5+1 in July 2015 was seen as a significant breakthrough in Iran's diplomacy with the West. But President Trump withdrew the US from the JCPOA in May 2018 and reimposed sanctions, a move condemned by the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Around 40 US military bases surround Iran in 'its' region.¹⁰ A number of Iran's nuclear scientists have been murdered inside the country: state-sponsored killings that have received little publicity or analysis from Western media.¹¹ Joe Biden, the Democratic president elected in 2021, has not reinstated the JCPOA (despite pressure from the EU and elsewhere), has kept the Pasdaran on the US list of 'terrorist' groups and has made no conciliatory overtures toward Iran. Indeed, the increasingly friendly relations between the US and Saudi Arabia (and other oil-rich states in the region) as well as the maintenance of financially supportive relations with Israel do not suggest any thaw in relations with the Islamic Republic, which is equally intransigent in its stance. The sale in 2021–2 of highly sophisticated drone equipment for use in Putin's war in Ukraine shows the emerging alignment of the Islamic Republic.

⁸ Kamran Matin, 'Uneven and Combined Development in World History: The International Relations of State-Formation in Premodern Iran', *European Journal of International Relations* 13:3 (2007): 419–47. Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁹ It is of course currently supplying Putin's Russia with drones.

¹⁰ For discussion and a map, see Aljazeera, 'Map: US Bases Encircle Iran', 1 May 2012, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2012/04/2012417131242767298.html

¹¹ Mehdi Hasan, 'Iran's Nuclear Scientists Are Not Being Assassinated. They Are Being Murdered', *The Guardian*, 16 January 2012, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/16/iran-scientists-state-sponsored-murder.

Thus, at the level of state activities, it is comparatively easy to understand the political extension of Iran into its wider neighbourhood and beyond – and the occasional hand of external states around and inside the country.

Second, and somewhat more complicated, is the dynamic nature of political communication between the *state and the nation*. Appadurai has quipped that ‘the nation and the state are each other’s project’¹² as states try to develop a strong sense of nationhood, including a shared culture and history, while some nations (Palestine) still wish to become states. Every state claims to represent not only the ‘people’ but also the ‘unity of its people’ and wields the monopoly of violence to ensure its governmentality. It is precisely through the enforcement of such claims that the state attempts to impose a singular politics and often fails to represent the unity of people it purports to represent. In the MENA region – and as a result of military interventions of imperial powers that of course were and are deterritorial – there are huge areas in which the very idea of the state or state power has lapsed or ceased to exist: this has occurred in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, Somalia and Sudan. This idea is often referred to with the concise and crude notion of a ‘failed state’. The other related paradox, as Rogers Brubaker reminds us, is that the issue of membership of a national polity is not always generated ‘by the movement of people over borders, but by the movement of borders over people’,¹³ whether expanding or contracting. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of various successor states or the breakup of the former Yugoslavia are good examples. Another fact that is rather conveniently ignored is that in the formation of nation-states and membership of its politics, many people did not join the state, but rather the state went to them. This is true of all empires, but particularly so in the case of US expansion into the Caribbean and Pacific.¹⁴ In the Middle East, two countries are still known not through the representation of the unity of their people or the name of the nation but by the title of the ruling family: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The state is no longer (if it ever was) the container of the nation; it is often its substitute.¹⁵

In contrast, in Iran, the state and the nation are often each other’s nemesis, locked in fierce political confrontation. The ‘nation’ here invokes a country’s citizens, its publics, approaching Arendt’s notion of the political as a contrast between a polis – or a *res publica* – where citizens act together to manage their own affairs and the state as holding the monopoly on violence and engaged in rulership over its citizens.¹⁶ This is in many ways the defining pattern of Iranian history, both before and certainly after the 1979 revolution. Even this distinction needs nuance when a *res publica* faces the state unmediated, in physical proximity, as (at the time of writing) the autumn of 2022 plays out. What is the appropriate language for this confrontation? Iranians are calling it a ‘revolution’.

¹² Arjun Appadurai, ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 7:2–3 (1990): 295–310.

¹³ Rogers Brubaker, ‘Migration, Membership, and the Modern Nation-State: Internal and External Dimensions of the Politics of Belonging’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 41:1 (2010): 61–78 at 69.

¹⁴ Brubaker, ‘Migration, Membership, and the Modern Nation-State’, 71.

¹⁵ The new law of nationality promulgated in Israel in July 2018 is yet another example of the lack of contiguity between people and political demarcations, with the Palestinians resident inside Israel becoming progressively further disenfranchised.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1963).

THE POLITICS OF THE STATE

Clearly, the Iranian state, like all other states, is most governmental *within* its borders. Iranians within it are required to pay taxes and abide by all laws – including those relating to censorship, hijab, sexual behaviour – to travel on an Iranian passport, and so on. Those individuals who question the actions of the state may feel the full force of the law through executions, imprisonments, censorship, travel bans and more.¹⁷ Many kinds of activists – trade unionists, women's groups, minority groups (Bahai'i, Jews, and so on) – as well as filmmakers, writers, journalists, editors, bloggers, poets, theatre directors, cartoonists, musicians, and others – have experienced the repressive hand of the Iranian state.¹⁸ In 2022 this has only become more violent, and more extreme.

However, the space of *Iran*, and thus of Iranian politics, has enlarged because of the out-migration of a substantial 'diaspora' since the 1979 revolution. More than four million people, including some of the most highly educated 'brains', have become dispersed across many different new host countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, France and Germany, but also Costa Rica, Malaysia, Japan and Norway, depending on the vicissitudes of international relations, immigration regimes and economic flux.¹⁹ These diasporic communities are neither post-national nor transnational. Rather they are treated, as Moallem has suggested, as the 'excess of the nation-state',²⁰ often encountering both racism in the host country and exclusion by 'their own state'. Access to new national locations is increasingly highly constrained. Over the past few years, the diaspora has gotten the right to vote in Iranian elections – yet the counting of votes often seems too fast to include that opinion – and it broadcasts and messages back to fellow countrymen and the Iranian state. The diaspora's solidarity with and extension of popular activity on the streets of Iran in the autumn of 2022 has become crucial in the unfolding dynamics of change.

The Islamic Republic has used various approaches to persuade, cajole and enforce its positions vis-à-vis its citizens and these have a reach far beyond the confines of the territory of Iran. The long arm of the state can reach out across borders to punish Iranians who live *outside* Iran. According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, the Iranian state has been involved with at least 162 extrajudicial killings of political opponents in 19 different countries around the world, including in France, Sweden, Austria, Germany, USA, Japan, Turkey and Switzerland.²¹ High-profile killings include the assassination of both Dr Abdol-Rahman Ghassemlou, Secretary General of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran in Vienna in 1989 and his successor, Dr Sadeq Sharafkandi, in the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin in 1992; the assassination of former Iranian Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar in Paris in 1991; the killing of Fereydoun Farrokhzad, a celebrated singer and artist living in Bonn, in 1992; luring the

¹⁷ Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh, *Cultural Revolution in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

¹⁸ Sreberny and Torfeh, *Cultural Revolution in Iran*; Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, *Blogistan* (I.B. Tauris, 2010).

¹⁹ Annabelle Sreberny, 'Media and Diasporic Consciousness: An Exploration among Iranians in London'. In *Ethnic Minorities and the Media*, ed Simon Cottle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁰ Minoo Moallem, '"Foreignness" and Be/longing: Transnationalism and Immigrant Entrepreneurial Spaces', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 20:1 (2000): 200–10.

²¹ See: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/reports/3152-no-safe-haven-iran-s-global-assassination-campaign.html.

France-based Iranian dissident journalist Ruhollah Zam to Iraq and executing him after taking him to Iran in 2018; and many more.

One victim of such an assassination by the Iranian state was Saeed Karimian, chairperson of the Dubai-based GEM TV Network. He and his Kuwaiti business partner were shot dead on 29 April 2017 in Istanbul. GEM TV runs 17 Persian language channels (with dubbed Turkish soap operas among its main and very popular programmes). In 2016, a revolutionary court in Iran passed a sentence of six years' imprisonment against Karimian for spreading propaganda. He also held British citizenship.²²

State violence against non-resident Iranians has taken many forms *inside* the country. Over the past few years, Iranian state activity has included the arrest of dual nationals entering the country to visit family or attend educational or cultural events, often for these individuals to be used as a pawn in negotiations with their new host country. According to Reuters,²³ since 2015, more than 30 people with dual nationality have been arrested in Iran, including students, lawyers, academics and charity workers; the majority detained in recent years have European citizenship. In February 2018 Kavous Seyed Emami, the Iranian–Canadian founder of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, died in solitary confinement in Evin Prison, having been charged with espionage. In 2003 another Iranian–Canadian, photojournalist Zahra Kazemi, was killed in the same prison, having been arrested for taking photographs of protesting families of political prisoners. The Irano–British woman Nazanin Zaghari Radcliffe spent five years in Evin, but was released in 2022 together with Anoosheh Ashuri, an Iranian who lives in London. Journalists covering the 2022 mobilisation while working for global media outlets in the UK have had threats made against their families living inside Iran.

In addition, the Iranian state, like most other states, is very active in mobilising politico-cultural support *beyond* its own borders. International media influence is important. Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) broadcasts to foreign audiences through 4 international news television channels, 6 satellite television channels and 30 radio channels broadcasting in 32 languages that include English, Arabic, Hebrew, Armenian, Turkish, Russian, Bengali and Japanese. Its *Jame-Jam* network (comprising three channels for Europe, America and Asia) also broadcasts specifically to the Iranian diaspora. Press TV, an English-language channel with offices in London, actively asserts its critical journalism vis-à-vis British politics; it recently added French news coverage to its portfolio. The IRIB's reach also extends to various online initiatives and under the order of the Supreme Leader the organisation is granted regulatory power. The tension between various factions and sections of the state is nothing new.²⁴ While the ICT Ministry has tried to capitalise on the increasing bandwidth, Freedom House has reported that 'in 2016, the IRIB notified all private IPTV providers that licenses issued to them by the ICT Ministry were invalid, insisting that only the IRIB has the

²² The Guardian, 'Iranian TV Executive Shot Dead in Istanbul, Turkish Media Report', 1 May 2017, www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/30/iranian-gem-tv-saeed-karimian-shot-dead-in-istanbul-turkish-media-reports.

²³ Reuters, 'Exclusive – Iran's Revolutionary Guards Arrest More Dual Nationals', 9 November 2017, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-iran-arrests-exclusive/exclusive-irans-revolutionary-guards-arrest-more-dual-nationals-idUKKBN1D90TE>.

²⁴ Sreberny and Khiabany, *Blogistan*.

power to issue licenses. The broadcaster began issuing its own licenses in 2017.’ The move and the notice were signed by Ebrahim Raisi, chief justice at the time, now the current president.²⁵

However, while the Iranian state is active in international broadcasting, it does not like being the target of such broadcasting from others. The sensitivity of the Iranian state to what it calls ‘soft war’²⁶ is evident in its long-running hostility towards the BBC, most especially BBC Persian, which was established in 2008 and aimed at Iranians inside Iran.²⁷ The state had tried to block reception but audiences became adept at retuning their Hotbird receivers; unable to attack the station, the state has moved against its Iranian employees. The Islamic Republic has sequestered the property of BBC Persian staff and even held their families to ransom. In October 2017, the Iranian state opened a criminal investigation into what it considered to be a ‘conspiracy against national security’ by 152 current and former BBC Persian journalists. Since the Iranian uprising in 2009, dozens of BBC journalists’ families and friends as well as those contributing to BBC Persian programmes have been harassed, investigated and put under pressure by the Iranian security forces. The National Union of Journalists (UK), the International Federation of Journalists and a number of human rights organisations have condemned the Iranian state treatment of BBC journalists and their families. In March 2018, the BBC World Service appealed to the UN for support to protect its staff.²⁸

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND THE POSSIBILITIES FOR AND LIMITS TO POLITICS

Communicative borders are ‘fluid’, and individuals can access multiple sources of information and cultural content. Digital technologies may further increase the geographic reach of Iranian politics and culture. The internet can link a national public across geographic borders. Home and away might appear all the same on Instagram or Telegram, on Snapchat or TikTok, which offer instantaneous communication and can facilitate diverse and multiple ‘publics’, often referred to as public spherules or even content bubbles.

The September 2022 popular mobilisation, triggered by the death in custody of a young woman, is the largest such street-based action since the revolution itself. Within days, its key slogan ‘Zan, Zendegi, Azadi’ had gained international recognition. Within three weeks Iranian singers had already produced cover versions and homages to Shervin Hajipour’s song. Global creatives have produced dance and lots of video compilations to its soundtrack. The band Coldplay sang the song together with Golshifteh Farahani during a live concert in Buenos Aires. Instagram, supposedly shut down, offers instant photography and video of street demonstrations and sites for the sharing of new artworks. Global celebrities are revealed to have Iranian spouses. Canada and the UK sanction the movement of IGRC individuals. And the country burns.

²⁵ Freedom House, ‘Freedom on the Net 2021: Iran’, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2021>.

²⁶ Annabelle Sreberny, ‘Talking Soft about “Soft” War’, *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 801–4.

²⁷ Sreberny and Torfeh, *Cultural Revolution in Iran*.

²⁸ The New Arab, ‘BBC Urges UN to Help Protect Rights of Iran Staff’, 12 March 2018, www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/3/12/bbc-urges-un-to-protect-its-iranian-staff.

The main problem with ‘techno-utopian’ media accounts, especially in their accounts of the ‘power’ of social media, is the absence of the ‘social’ in their analysis. They are blind to any notion of social power, interaction or intention. Raymond Williams insisted that technologies are ‘social’ and embedded in social relationships, and thus are part of and shaped by social struggle. He brilliantly demonstrated this with reference to literacy when he suggested that ‘there was no way to teach a man to read the Bible which did not also enable him to read the radical press. A controlled intention became an uncontrolled effect.’²⁹

The Iranian uprising in 2009 showed how the very technologies invented for commercial and military purposes can also produce the unintended spin-off effect of social movement, creating an intense tug of war between nation and state (inside and outside Iran). In 2017 we witnessed another uprising which shook, and targeted, the entire Iranian state. Since then, we have also witnessed waves of protests by truck drivers, successive sit-ins by teachers and strikes by workers in Khuzestan, not to mention the stunning and courageous acts of the ‘Daughters of the Street of Revolution’. Another uprising erupted after the hike in petrol prices in 2019. Without doubt, social media played a role in informing, connecting, mobilising and generating national and international solidarities, hence the significant backlash against and renewed censorship of social media platforms. The shooting down of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 by the Iranian military triggered protests from late November 2019 through January 2020, despite the state shutting down the internet, disrupting satellite signals and enacting brutal repression. This tells us something about the complexity of the social and political dynamics in Iran.

The women-led mobilisation of September 2022 continues at the time of writing, despite the use of rubber bullets and live ammunition, despite arrests, imprisonments and deaths. It continues despite the state’s periodic shutting down and slowing of the internet, its blocking of many social platforms and its rhetoric that it is foreign agents who are driving the movement. The state and the nation are raging again.

Thus, contrary to much that has been written in recent decades, globalisation and neoliberalism have not made the state irrelevant or caused it to disappear from the communication landscape. Indeed, in many places the state has become more concentrated, more hierarchical, more centralised, and sometimes less visible but just as fierce in its articulation and brutal defence of the existing order and social relations. The state, all over the world, also remains messy, contradictory, self-denying and opaque. Iran is no exception. Censorship is only one function of the state, albeit an important one in the case of Iran. The state is also a patron, an entrepreneur, a rule-maker, a data collector and controller, a bully and a propagandist.³⁰ The central Iranian state has played and continues to play a major role in defining ‘national culture’, promoting certain traditions and heritage and discarding/marginalising/demonising other histories, traditions and aspirations. The Iranian state, rather unexceptionally, continues to own, legislate, regulate, subsidise and, of course, suppress the media.

In addition, many states, including in Iran, remain contradictory entities and sites of struggle for competing interests. The complicated factionalism inside the Iranian state, from 1979 to date, has always allowed for competing views from different factions and opened up spaces for dissenting independent voices. This was highly visible in the diversity of the press imme-

²⁹ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974): 134–5.

³⁰ Aeron Davis, Natalie Fenton, Des Freedman and Gholam Khiabany, *Media, Democracy and Social Change: Re-imagining Political Communications* (London: SAGE Publications, 2020).

diately after the revolution but also evident in the heyday of the reform movement up to the 2009 uprising against what was effectively an electoral coup. That struggle has continued in different shapes and forms, and in much more diverse ways, in cyberspace. There is no space to develop this argument here, but we would encourage looking at the debates after the consolidation of power by the current ruling elites in the 1980s, for example, over video or satellites; the press law which sparked the student protests in July 1999; the struggle over control of the internet, and the like.³¹ The state's march towards consolidating its power and homogenising its rank has been bloody and brutal. This includes the execution of the first director general of Islamic Republic Broadcasting; forcing the first president of the republic and the proprietor of the *Engheleb Eslami* newspaper into exile; and the prosecution of a number of ministers, officers and attorneys who owned and controlled a significant number of newspapers before, during and after Khatami's presidency. It is crucial to remember that those individuals and media outlets were affiliated to the Iranian state.

The treatment of oppositional voices such as national and religious minorities – note the extreme violence meted out on Kurds and Baluch in autumn 2022 – the left, writers, artists, women's organisations, students and others remains one of the greatest tragedies in the history of not only the Islamic Republic but of modern Iran.

It is also evident that social media houses not only a wide range of 'users', but also protagonists and producers of ideas and content. The online environment is not exclusively the stomping ground of amateur intellectuals (to use Said's famous description). There are various groups that are representative of their class and of their knowledge. Their level of intervention is varied, historically shifting, and is dependent on not only material resources but also their location in geography and in politics.³² Not all who occupy spaces in online and offline media do so in order to challenge or bypass the state wall of censorship. The central Iranian state and its various factions have a strong presence there. They own, publish, mobilise, demonise, bully, gather and control data as well as access. Interestingly, a significant volume of this content, offline and online, has relatively little to do with politics. For some, in particular the sons of key figures in the state (*agha zadeh ha*), Instagram in particular has become a space to show off their wealth and lavish lifestyle (bizarrely echoing the Rich Kids of Iran on Instagram). Recent protests – in 2017, 2019 and 2022 – were not just facilitated by social media, but were reactions to and justified anger toward the staggering inequality in Iran that was being flaunted³³ on social media. Hence it is important also to consider the increased relevance of the internet to the Iranian economy. The shutting down of the internet in the November 2020 protests cost the Iranian economy an estimated \$1.5 billion.³⁴ In short, the well-known binaries of market versus state fail to recognise and consider the complexity of the logic, dynamics and strategies of the state. The twists and turns in the state's desire to control the monopoly over the legitimate use of symbolic force and violence make the contradiction quite evident.

³¹ Gholam Khiabany, *Iranian Media: The Paradox of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2009).

³² Sreberny and Khiabany, *Blogistan*.

³³ Rohollah Faghihi, 'Yachts, Fast Cars and Instagram: Iran's Rich Kids Enrage Sanctions-Hit Citizens', 2018, www.middleeasteye.net/news/yachts-fast-cars-and-instagram-irans-rich-kids-enrage-sanctions-hit-citizens.

³⁴ Khosro Kalbasi, 'Iranians Endure Internet Shutdown with Despair and Disarray', *The Atlantic Council*, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iranians-endure-internet-shutdown-with-despair-and-disarray/>.

It is well known that Iranian women have used new media to considerable effect.³⁵ Yet the dynamics of such interaction reveal its complexity and multiple senses of place. This was evident in the case of a highly publicised and successful Facebook campaign called 'My Stealthy Freedom', launched in May 2014 by Iranian journalist and activist Massih Alinejad. Its page was dedicated to posting images of women inside Iran who had dared to remove their hijab. Within a few days the page had received more than 100,000 likes, and in less than a year after the launch of the campaign, the page had more than 760,000 followers: a much bigger following than that of the Facebook page of 2009 presidential election winner Mir-Hossein Musavi at the peak of the 2009 Iranian uprising. The international success of the Stealthy Freedom campaign showed that new technologies can indeed break geographical boundaries and precipitate international sympathy and solidarity. However, these technologies are also born in specific historical societies and social relations. But time/space compression does not make space irrelevant, and new technologies by themselves cannot bypass assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes. The overwhelming feeling *outside* Iran has been one of support, solidarity and encouragement. Yet, the positive international coverage and support should not obscure a number of contradictions and dilemmas, especially at a time in which 'saving' Muslim women³⁶ has been on the political agenda and an excuse for military interventions in the region. There is always a danger, as Zishad Lak reminds us, that a local struggle might be assimilated into something completely different. For her, the Stealthy Freedom campaign was one of those instances in which 'local resistance risks being thrust into obscurity to be protected from colonial interpretations. What we should be wary of is the audience or the interlocutor that is implicit in the message around which the actor organizes her actions.'³⁷ In every story published in mainstream British or American media, one came across supporting statements encouraging Iranian women with phrases such as 'Go Girls!', or simply describing participants in this campaign as 'Beautiful, smart, confident, and happy' and welcoming them 'to the 21st century!'³⁸ The mismatch between local context and concerns (internal) and the framing and reception of these concerns outside the geographical boundaries of the local (external) is rarely considered. 2022 provides an important moment for such scrutiny.

Despite repeated complaints about the 'lack of media attention' to the September 2022 mobilisation, a huge amount of images, moving images, sound and story is available to anyone who cares to look. And the performance of international solidarity, especially by women, is also colossal. At a moment where women are facing conservative backlashes in many countries (the erosion of *Roe v Wade* in the US and abortion restrictions elsewhere; domestic and public violence against women; trolling and stalking on digital platforms, and so on), there is little doubt that Iranian women's bravery has prompted recognition of the attacks on women's rights, livelihoods and well-being almost everywhere. And such international solidarity is symbolically significant.

³⁵ Annabelle Sreberny, 'Women's Digital Activism: Making Change in the Middle East'. In *Digital Middle East: State and Society in the Information Age*, ed. Mohamed Zayani (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2018).

³⁶ Leila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2013).

³⁷ Zishad Lak, 'Stealthy Freedoms and the Colonial Gaze', *Feminism*, 2014, www.feminisms.org/6640/stealthy-freedoms-and-the-colonial-gaze/.

³⁸ Gholam Khiabany, 'The Importance of "Social" in Social Media: The Lessons from Iran'. In *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, ed. Axel Bruns, Gunn Enli, Eli Skogerbø, Anders Olof Larsson and Christian Christensen (New York: Routledge, 2015), 223–34.

However, the consequences of these mimicked actions of ‘solidarity’ are rarely noted. Brave young women inside Iran taking off their scarves, brandishing them on the street, burning them and cutting their hair in defiance can bring the weight of the regime, its security forces and its facial-recognition technologies³⁹ down upon them. Global female film stars and political figures lightly trimming their hair in a public act of solidarity, even shaving their heads completely, face no such consequence. Indeed, they gain brownie points for this virtue-signalling, while a costly visit to the hairdresser is the worst outcome.

The current mobilisation once again exposes the dilemmas of the Islamic Republic in regard to its digital environment. There is friction between government factions of the state, competition between the institutional interests of various state agencies and tensions between the state and the public. The Islamic Republic officially has encouraged the use of the internet yet issues of access and control over content remain controversial. Fearful of the formation of any alternative source of social power, the state has taken a leading role in providing internet access and services. A majority of shares of the Telecommunication Company of Iran were ‘sold’ to the Revolutionary Guards for \$5bn in 2009, clearly demonstrating the significance of the internet to the state. This military takeover, which was done under the banner of privatisation, also points to the security dimension of the internet in Iran. The Islamic Republic has also devised a range of other controls, implemented with a greater or lesser degree of efficiency. These controls include ISP licensing, internet filtering, censorship of sites, control of internet speeds, attempts to inundate the net with favourable content, criminalisation of digital activities and arrests of activists. Control of independent media, the closure of many reformist newspapers and the erosion of state legitimacy, coupled with growing popular dissatisfaction in Iran, helped to develop a vigorous cyberculture.⁴⁰ But the collapse of the Iranian ‘green uprising’ in 2009 and the massive state crackdown on all forms of political activism (digital and otherwise) put an end to that phenomenon. In short, the Iranian state, rather unsurprisingly, relies on the use of coercion and violence (physical as well as symbolic) as its ultimate sanction.

Activists have migrated to social media and platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which are still officially banned in Iran – although that has not deterred key Iranian officials, including the supreme leader, or institutions from using such platforms.

Iranians have always been very early adopters of new digital platforms. The story of Viber is interesting, with around 10 million people (12 per cent of the Iranian population) using it; Iranians were the leading group of Viber users internationally in 2015, a trend similar to their earlier adoption of blogs. The Iranian police arrested 11 people in September 2014 for circulating jokes about Ayatollah Khomeini on Viber.⁴¹ Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei, the first deputy of the judiciary branch, described applications such as Viber, WhatsApp and Tango as networks ‘with immoral and criminal content’,⁴² and gave the government a month to block them. The communication minister replied that blocking such networks would not solve any

³⁹ Azadeh Akbari, ‘Iranian Authorities Plan to Use Facial Recognition to Enforce New Hijab Law’, *The Guardian*, 5 September 2022, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/sep/05/iran-government-facial-recognition-technology-hijab-law-crackdown.

⁴⁰ Sreberny and Khiabany, *Blogistan*.

⁴¹ See www.similarweb.com/blog/worldwide-messaging-apps.

⁴² Farhad Khosrokhavar, *The New Arab Revolutions that Shook the World* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 152.

problem.⁴³ Iranian officials and institutions were among Viber users and the fact that it was developed by Israel did not stop Press TV or Rafsanjani's website from using the app. Even security officials are divided over how to tackle these networks. Ahmadi-Moghadam, chief of the Iranian police, has admitted that the use of such apps is inevitable but added that the state needs to find ways of monitoring and controlling the inappropriate use of these services.⁴⁴ He did urge the Supreme Council on Cyberspace (SCC) to come up with appropriate guidelines regulating the use of networks such as Facebook and Viber. Another instance of the regime clamping down on social media was the arrest of seven young men and women in May 2014 for posting their version of a Pharrell Williams music video on YouTube.⁴⁵

These controversies also have a material dimension. Tools such as Viber and WhatsApp are denting the profits of the Telecommunication Company of Iran. They provide Iranians with what 'voice over the Internet protocol' (VoIP) had offered in the early 2000s: low-cost telephone communication. TCI reported a \$20 million profit in 1998 but in 2002, despite a three-fold increase in the number of people with access to telephone lines in that period, it reported a loss of \$23 million. As expected, private internet and telephone providers were blamed for this loss in profit and the reversal of TCI's fortunes and, as a reaction, the government began to close many cyber cafés. The Revolutionary Guards, owners of TCI, reacted once again with the same arguments of moral crusade, waging their own 'soft war'; however, this struggle may actually be more about money than cultural influence.

Telegram began to emerge as a favourite platform in 2015 and soon ran into difficulties with the regime. In October 2015, Pavel Durov, the co-founder of Telegram, revealed that Iran's Ministry of Information and Communications Technology had requested 'spying and censorship tools' from the service.⁴⁶ When Telegram refused to give in to the minister's request, the ministry moved to block the service – though this claim was vehemently denied by Iranian officials. Because of their ease of use and accessibility via mobile devices, SNSs have started to replace blogs and emails. Their popularity is such that many state officials, including the supreme leader, news organisations, political parties, musicians and various social groups, have opened their own channels on Telegram to share and disseminate their works, ideas and analysis. As an emerging company, Telegram cannot ignore such a big market as Iran and many organisations have expressed concerns over its possible cooperation with the Iranian state. For example, on 18 November 2015 Article 19, a British human rights organisation, urged Telegram to 'clarify the nature of its negotiations with Iranian officials, including the nature of any data, technology, and censorship being requested, as well as the date on which discussions began, and which elements of the Iranian regime have been involved'.⁴⁷ Such

⁴³ BBC Persian, 'Iran Communication Minister: The Problem Will Not Be Solved by Closure of SNSs', 1 October 2014, www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2014/10/141001_filter_communication_vaezi.

⁴⁴ BBC Persian, 'Iran's Police Chief: Inevitability of use of Viber and Facebook', 24 September 2014, www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2014/09/140924_145_police_filtering_ahmadimoghaddam.

⁴⁵ Adam Withnall, 'Young Iranian Pharrell Williams Fans Arrested and Made to Confess on TV for Being Too "Happy"', *The Independent*, 21 May 2014, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/young-iranians-arrested-and-made-to-confess-on-tv-for-being-too-happy-9409988.html.

⁴⁶ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 'Russian Web Pioneer Says Iran Blocks Telegram App after Seeking Spying Tools', 20 October 2015, www.refworld.org/docid/56813c896.html.

⁴⁷ See 'Iran: Privacy and Censorship Fears around Telegram Messaging App', Article 19, 18 November 2015, www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/38196/en/iran:-privacy-and-censorship-fears-around-telegram-messaging-app.

expressions of concern about privacy and Iranian government interference with popular communication tools and applications are not without precedent. In 2009, Nokia Siemens Network was forced to confirm that it had provided the Telecommunication Company of Iran with equipment that allowed it to spy on its customers. This led to a campaign against the Finnish information technology company and ‘Nokia: Disconnecting People’ became one of the slogans of Iranian activists in 2009.⁴⁸ Despite all of these issues, access to such tools has increased rapidly. In 2018, despite massive investment by the Iranian state to block and filter Telegram, 40 million Iranians (20 per cent of Telegram users across the world) were using it, around 90 per cent of Iranian adults. In the same year, Iran was among the top ten users of Instagram, with 24 million registered users. Such platforms blur the line between inside and outside and help create a transnationally stretched Iranian politico-cultural space.

The autumn 2022 uprising has brought these issues to the fore again. The internet has been shut down for brief periods, especially in Tehran and in Kurdistan, and its speeds drastically reduced. Instagram and WhatsApp have also been targeted. Mobile networks have been disrupted, with Iran’s big three mobile providers Irancell, Rightel and MCI blocking evening internet traffic from outside. But Iranian youth are digital adepts so usage of Tor and Psiphon is booming, and Skype seems to function well.⁴⁹ Mobile phones equipped with SNS capability are highly politically relevant. They allow for the exchange of information between Iranians inside the country but link them to the outside world, allowing individuals to act as amateur photojournalists during demonstrations and getting images of recent events out to the world, in the absence of major international news channels.⁵⁰ Instagram accounts such as *from_iran* and *1500tasvir* distribute photographs and video footage daily, despite the prohibition, and some of this independent footage finds its way to BBC Persian, VOA and Al Jazeera.

Social networking services thus connect Iranians inside and outside Iran but are also heavily used by the state itself, and while the government might wish to control, and in the last instance close down, these platforms, its own involvement with them makes such control a mixed blessing. In the case of social media it is not just the contradiction between the original design (a controlled intention) and the use of technology (an uncontrollable effect), and the obvious and stark interplay between public and private uses, that are confronting us. The guerilla political struggle and the constant shift from one software to the next, one application to another, one platform to a different one, reveals more about the nature of resistance and political engagement than technologies per se or the iron fist of the state. All of this is, of course, not unique to Iran.

⁴⁸ The Guardian, ‘Iranian Consumers Boycott Nokia for “Collaboration”’, 15 July 2009, www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/14/nokia-boycott-iran-election-protests.

⁴⁹ Stephanie Höppner, ‘Iran: Are Social Media Platforms Censoring Dissent?’ *DW News*, 10 May 2022, www.dw.com/en/iran-are-social-media-platforms-censoring-dissent/a-63347228.

⁵⁰ Farhad Khosrokhavar, *The New Arab Revolutions that Shook the World* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 152.

EXTERNAL INCURSIONS INTO IRAN

The crossing of territorial borders by the state to reach and influence audiences, or harass, recruit or even kill dissident voices, is also not unique to the Iranian state. The obverse, incursions into Iran by external forces, is evident and sometimes even deadlier.

During the Iranian uprising in 2009, the US government asked Twitter to postpone its scheduled maintenance service because of Twitter's alleged significance to the Iranian uprising. The US government had made every effort to appear as if it was not intervening in Iran's domestic affairs. However, Hillary Clinton defended that decision by saying that 'the United States believes passionately and strongly in the basic principle [...] We promote the right of free expression'.⁵¹

Such attempts to promote the myths of 'technologies of freedom' were being made at the same time as these very technologies (or alternative uses of them, particularly in the case of WikiLeaks) were being suppressed by the US government and, moreover, at the same time as US policy was contributing to censorship of the internet in Iran. It was not until President Obama delivered his famous message for the Iranian New Year on 20 March 2012, when he asked Iranian leaders to bring down the 'electronic curtain' of censorship, that he promised to lift the sanctions that had disconnected Iranians from the internet. The tragedy is not just that the US government had contributed to that 'electronic curtain', but rather that it was hypocritically trying to 'help' Iranians to break free of the government at a time when US economic sanctions were making the Iranian people more dependent than ever on the Iranian regime (a parallel to the situation in Iraq). US sanctions threaten the livelihoods and health of the Iranian people, but at least, thanks to the US government's generosity, they could access Google+. President Obama promised that, despite objections from the Iranian government, the US would launch a Virtual Embassy that would bring 'Iranians information they cannot access from their own government-controlled media, ranging from world news to facts on U.S. policy and culture'. As Ben Rhodes, deputy national security advisor for strategic communications and speechwriting, commented, the next step was to make easily available 'software and services that *Iranians have told us* are essential in order to effectively use the Internet'.⁵²

Since the coup of 1953, and perhaps even before, there have been numerous attempts to provide Iranians with what they 'need'.⁵³ The policy of helping the Iranian people gained considerable traction with the popular movement against the 'stolen election' of 2008, in what became known as the Green Movement. For example, in January 2010 the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the US government was searching for ways to support the Iranian opposition. In an article entitled 'U.S. Shifts Iran Focus to Support Opposition', Jay Solomon suggested that the government was considering new sanctions that would target individuals and institutions in Iran directly involved in suppressing dissent in the country. It was also reported that although

⁵¹ See U.S. Department of State, 'Remarks with Israeli Foreign Minister Avidgor Lieberman', 17 June 2009, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/06/125044.htm>

⁵² Ben Rhodes, 'On Nowruz, President Obama Speaks to the Iranian People', *The White House Blog*, 20 March 2013, www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/03/20/nowruz-president-obama-speaks-iranian-people.

⁵³ For an informative and relevant critique of a well-known US intervention in Iran, that is, the CIA coup against Mosaddeq in 1953, see Mark J. Gasiorowski, 'The Causes of Iran's 1953 Coup: A Critique of Darioush Bayandor's *Iran and the CIA*', *Iranian Studies* 45 (2012): 669–78.

Obama was not considering regime change, 'Washington remains committed to a dual-track approach of pursuing dialogue aimed at ending Iran's nuclear program while applying increasing financial pressure if the talks fail'.⁵⁴ Eighteen months later the hint for the 'Iranians' to tell 'us' what was essential for them came in two interviews that Hillary Clinton (then US secretary of state) gave to BBC Persian and Voice of America (VoA) in October 2011. In both interviews, she explicitly suggested that the US government would have supported the uprising in Iran if people had asked for it.⁵⁵ Around the same time, Kenneth Pollack of the Brookings Institution and Ray Takeyh, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, argued in a joint article entitled 'Doubling Down on Iran' and published in the *Washington Quarterly* that the dual-track policy of successive US administrations had failed and that the time had come to pressure Iran where it hurt most. In rethinking US strategy, they persisted in keeping the option of a 'very limited military operation' on the table but insisted that policymakers had to start breaking 'old taboos – such as providing direct assistance to Iranian opposition groups'.⁵⁶ The strategy of 'doubling down' on Iran proposed by the authors had clear 'cultural/technological' elements. Connecting with the Green Movement (which by then had collapsed) was regarded as a top priority, but the authors also pointed out that Iran is a place of labour, student and ethnic minority protests, and while it was important for the CIA to be careful not to 'fall into traps inevitably laid by Tehran's own security forces at this point, it would be extremely productive to establish contact with Iranian opposition groups in hope of finding out what the United States could do to help them'.⁵⁷

Such external 'help' is tied up with funding of organisations and activities. Many of the initiatives involve media projects. In addition to the US government's \$36 million combined budget for two official US media channels, Radio Farda and VoA, various US institutions fund other media/cultural outlets including TV channels and websites. It is hard to determine precisely how much is invested and where, but patterns of mismanagement, abuse and corruption have been reported.⁵⁸ The point here is that communication technologies are not simply a force for opposition from below; they also facilitate attempts to direct opposition from above and from outside. What Pollack and Takeyh suggest could help the Iranian opposition and hurt the regime 'lies in the overlapping areas of Internet freedom and information and cyber warfare'.⁵⁹ Helping to reopen internet services in Iran or trying to keep them open was one aspect of this policy. The other was to try to wrest control over information technology from the Iranian state. Added to the already rich mix of voices is the Saudi funding of the Iran International television network.

⁵⁴ Jay Solomon, 'U.S. Shifts Iran Focus to Support Opposition', *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 January 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB126300060937222569>.

⁵⁵ For a trenchant critique of the US attempt and the complicity of some Iranian actors, see Hamid Dabashi, 'Fifth Column of the Postmodern Kind', *Al Jazeera*, 21 November 2011, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/20111120132050412430.html.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh, 'Doubling Down on Iran', *The Washington Quarterly* 34 (2011): 17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁸ For problems associated with VoA, see *VOA PNN Watchdog*, accessed 10 January 2015, <http://www.voapnnwatchdog.com/>; and for reports of financial irregularity associated with the National Iranian American Council, see *National Endowment for Democracy*, 24 April 2010, accessed 10 January 2015, <http://www.iranian-americans.com/docs/NedReport.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh, 'Doubling Down on Iran', *The Washington Quarterly* 34 (2011): 17.

However, the struggles around the message involve not only platform politics but also cyber warfare. Iran has been the object of some of the first moves by Western powers in this new form of warfare, presaged in the early 1990s and made real in the noughties with the deployment of Stuxnet in 2009.⁶⁰ In 2012 this was ranked highest of the ten most destructive computer viruses, described as ‘a cartoon villain come to life: it was the first computer virus designed specifically to cause damage in the real, as opposed to virtual, world’.⁶¹ It is believed to have badly impeded Iran’s nuclear enrichment programme. US–Israel collaboration in developing Stuxnet is not denied by either state, but what is usually ignored is that the product of that collaboration was not one but three viruses: Stuxnet came first and was followed by Flame and DUQU. Another ignored dimension is that while such attacks occur in the virtual realm, their damage is real and physical. Such cyberattacks were part of the ‘doubling down on Iran’ policy that has so far involved the killing of five nuclear scientists in Iran since 2007. Technological interventions have moved from creating and supporting a fifth column in Iran to waging war in the fifth domain (the other military operational domains are land, air, sea and space).⁶²

Barack Obama expanded the War on Terror and nurtured the security state to an even greater extent than his predecessor. *The Economist* reported that he had ‘declared America’s digital infrastructure to be a “strategic national asset” and appointed Howard Schmidt, the former head of security at Microsoft, as his cyber-security tsar’. In May 2010 the Pentagon set up its new Cyber Command (Cybercom) headed by General Keith Alexander, director of the National Security Agency (NSA), whose mandate was to conduct ‘full-spectrum’ operations to defend American military networks and attack other countries’ systems. Precisely how, and by what rules, was secret.⁶³ In addition, in July 2011 *Reuters* cited Deputy Defense Secretary William Lynn as saying that the Pentagon wanted to avoid militarising cyberspace, but would treat it as an ‘operational domain’.⁶⁴

US policy toward Iran took a turn for the worse under Trump, and Biden has not reversed that. The JCPOA has not been revived and signed. Instead, the Islamic Republic is selling sophisticated drone technologies for Putin’s war in Ukraine. State intransigence means that Iran is missing a golden opportunity to once again become a major supplier of oil to the West.

THE ISSUES OF 2022

At the time of writing in late 2022, many crises face Iran: environmental, economic, political and cultural. The Islamic Republic was badly shaken by the internal unrest that spread across

⁶⁰ Laurent Giacobino, Arash Abadpour, Collin Anderson, Fred Petrossian and Caroline Nellemann, ‘Whither Blogestan: Evaluating Shifts in Persian Cyberspace’, Iran Media Program, Annenberg School for Communications, University of Pennsylvania (2014), 3.

⁶¹ Sharon Weinberger, ‘The Top Ten Most-Destructive Computer Viruses’, Smithsonian.com, 19 March 2012: www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/top-ten-most-destructive-computer-viruses-159542266/

⁶² *The Economist*, ‘War in the Fifth Domain: Are the Mouse and Keyboard the New Weapons of Conflict’, 1 July 2010, www.economist.com/node/16478792.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ David Alexander, ‘Pentagon to Treat Cyberspace as “Operational Domain”’, 14 July 2011, www.reuters.com/article/idUSN1E76D1QY20110714.

numerous cities in the winter of 2017–18 as popular concern about the state of the economy, the environment and indeed international affairs spilled onto the streets. During 2018–19 there were sporadic protests around the country regarding water shortages, unpaid salaries and heavy currency depreciation. These show a new and different urban spatiality, away from major cities to smaller towns where there has historically been less investment and less economic activity, suggesting that place still matters. But these were ruthlessly suppressed, with estimates of 1500 deaths during that period.

Iran is experiencing its worst drought in recent history. There are severe water shortages and limits of accessibility; the famous Zayanderud River in Isfahan is completely dry, mocking its famous bridges, while Lake Urumieh has almost disappeared. Electricity is frequently cut off, cutting the internet, halting lifts and disrupting air conditioning in a very hot summer.⁶⁵ Dust storms undermine farming while air pollution in Tehran often leads to schools being shut for health reasons.

Economic conditions are profoundly undermined by US-mandated sanctions but made worse by incompetent government. Inflation is running at more than 50 per cent, workers strike periodically without much success and, with the shrinking of subsidies for basic food stuffs, life even with two wages or salaries in a household is very difficult. There are currently (autumn 2022) strikes in the Bandar Abbas and Abadan oil refineries, the Haft Tappeh sugar factory, the Kangan and Hengam petrochemical plants and elsewhere.

These elements are the lived experience of Iranians inside the country, making them angry with an incompetent government that prefers foreign adventures to inward investment. Such frustrations and disappointments sit especially hard on the shoulders of a young population – 60 per cent of whom are under 30 years of age – who are highly educated, with more young women than men at university, yet with limited opportunities for employment or creativity. It is this accumulation of crises that lies behind the widespread mobilisation of autumn 2022. However, these also open up a gap with the diaspora, who do not experience such crises – or at least not in the same form.

CONCLUSION

So, where is Iran? What conclusions can we draw about the relevance of distance in contemporary national politics? We see Iran caught up in a vortex of international relations, while for many Iranians these conflictual international relations are a diversion from the more pressing issues of domestic politics.

We see the emergence of stretched national publics, with Iranians inside and outside Iran sharing images, jokes and political analyses. With the speed and immediacy of communications, dispersed populations can inhabit the ‘same’ timeframe.

Yet, we also see that lived experience inside and outside the country is very different and a politics that emerges from everyday grievances may diverge from the more abstracted, more ideological positions of those further away. The diaspora sometimes waves Pahlavi flags while those in Iran laugh. Similarly, while the state might have long arms, it also has even more

⁶⁵ Saeed Kamali Deghan, “‘Desperate to Find a Way Out’: Iran Edges towards Precipice”, *The Guardian*, 20 July 2018, www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/20/desperate-to-find-a-way-out-iran-edges-towards-precipice.

powerful short arms and those within its territorial reach feel much more severe repression than those outside. International solidarity is important but carries little consequence for the participants and for the politics. It is those at home, in front of the state, who feel its power.

Neither the state nor the nation is a singular entity; both have profound divisions. Everyday difficulties inside Iran and vastly different diasporic lived experiences produce a psycho-cultural gap between Iranians outside and Iranians inside the territorial boundary of the country. But women's rights, and the concurrent demand for cultural opening under the Islamic Republic, is currently a field where all are joined.

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10. Saudi Arabia's centralized political structure: prospects and challenges

Eman Alhussein

INTRODUCTION

For decades, the political structure of Saudi Arabia relied on a system of power-sharing that ensured the continuity of the monarchy. Senior members of the royal family headed ministries, religious clerics influenced public opinion and maintained religious teachings, and the business elite gained access to contracts and business deals with the state. This arrangement was crucial for maintaining domestic stability, especially with the changes brought by the oil boom in the 1970s. On the other hand, this political structure stood in the way of introducing changes to the economic and social life that might upset the power-sharing dynamic. When King Salman ascended to the throne in 2015, he implemented vast changes that dismantled the power-sharing dynamic in order to establish absolute centralization. In doing so, King Salman moved slowly but surely to change the line of succession and reshuffle government posts. In 2017 King Salman removed Mohammed bin Nayef, the crown prince at that time, to make way for his son Mohammed bin Salman to become next in line to the throne. At that time, Mohammed bin Salman was already the minister of defense and the head of two councils created by King Salman to oversee the country's economic, political, and security affairs. The centralization has allowed the crown prince all the power he needed to implement his ambitious roadmap for a post-oil-era "Vision 2030." While the absolute centralization has allowed an easier route to execute bold decisions and alter the kingdom's social and economic system, it has also upset the balance of power that ensured the long-term continuity of the royal family over the past decades.

THE DYNAMICS OF POWER-SHARING

When King Abdulaziz, the founder of the third Saudi state, passed away in 1953, his son Saud ascended to the throne. Just before his death, King Abdulaziz created the Council of Ministers to ensure that power-sharing between his sons would not result in conflict between them.¹ However, Saud began to appoint his sons to high positions in government "in preparation of a new primogeniture arrangement."² This escalated the power struggle between Saud and his half-brother Faisal, who became crown prince after Abdulaziz's death. Faisal and Saud

¹ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 104.

² Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Mystique of Monarchy: The Magic of Royal Succession in Saudi Arabia," in *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed (London: Hurst & Co., 2018), 52.

were often in conflict but the latter's mismanagement of the state's budget and favoring of his sons made it easy for King Abdulaziz's sons to side with Faisal against Saud, resulting in Saud's abdication in 1964.³ Faisal then ensured the process of a horizontal succession through power-sharing among the sons of King Abdulaziz. Gause argues that the internal unity among the ruling family since the Saud–Faisal power struggle has “allowed them to fend off domestic challenges and confront regional crises in a coherent fashion and has prevented outside powers and local actors from being able to play factions of the family against each other.”⁴ It was also during King Faisal's era that a bureaucratic system was created that would stay in effect for decades to come. This was crucial for the enduring power of the Al Saud family, which rested on three domestic political factors:

1. An oil-funded, patronage-based system that links important constituencies to the ruling elite while keeping them divided from each other.
2. A strong relationship with the religious establishment that provides both legitimization ideologically and support from an important social constituency.
3. Cohesion within the ruling family itself.⁵

The centralization that King Faisal created was important to combat the fluidity of the state apparatus that was common during King Saud's era. On the other hand, it also had its disadvantages, as it “continued to prevent meaningful coordination between different agencies; while gross nepotism was curtailed, informal structures of favoritism and brokerage persisted.”⁶ Indeed, important ministries such as the ministry of interior, the ministry of foreign affairs, and the ministry of defense were distributed among senior members of the royal family and their offspring. For example, King Faisal's son Saud was minister of foreign affairs from 1975 until 2015. The ministry of interior was in the hands of Prince Nayef, and the role of deputy went to his son Mohammed. After Prince Nayef's death in 2012, Mohammed became the minister of interior.

The power-sharing dynamic that Faisal ensured during his era created “fiefdoms” that allowed senior members of the royal family access to state contracts through their various governmental positions. Hertog states: “All of the major princes jealously guarded their administrative territories, expanded their array of clients, and defended their wide-reaching autonomy. Their rapidly growing ministries became irreducibly identified with them as individuals.”⁷ King Faisal's allocation of important ministerial posts to his brothers did not prevent him from maintaining a centralized political structure to ensure that he retained ultimate power. In doing so, “Faisal sat atop the bureaucratic apparatus and controlled all major national decisions, allowing for little autonomous intra-agency coordination or initiative.”⁸ The number of positions King Faisal held during his time contributed to the maximization of centralization. Such

³ Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), 62.

⁴ F. Gregory Gause III, “Saudi Regimes Stability and Challenges,” in *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed (London: Hurst & Co., 2018), 37.

⁵ Gause, “Saudi Regimes Stability and Challenges,” 31.

⁶ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers and Bureaucrats*, 61.

⁷ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers and Bureaucrats*, 65.

⁸ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers and Bureaucrats*, 66.

arrangement would be repeated when Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince in 2017, as he held more key positions than King Faisal did during his time.⁹

ROLE OF THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT

The intertwining dynamic between the religious and political spheres is another important characteristic of Saudi Arabia's political structure. In 1744, Mohammed bin Saud formed a religio-political alliance with Mohammed bin Abdulwahab. This alliance allowed a division of labor: Mohammed bin Saud was in charge of the state's political affairs whereas Mohammed bin Abdulwahab took charge of the religious domain. The partnership helped the state's vast expansion as it enabled the maintenance of political legitimacy and increased the importance and centrality of religion at that time. This alliance continued to be crucial for future rulers, especially the founder of the third Saudi state, Abdulaziz.

The religio-political alliance played a key role in the formation and expansion of the third Saudi state. After Abdulaziz captured Riyadh in 1902 he declared himself an *imam*, a title that was essential for granting him the religious legitimacy his ancestors enjoyed since the founding of the first Saudi state.¹⁰ During the unification of the third Saudi state from 1902 to 1932, King Abdulaziz utilized the religious dimension to support his conquests. Moreover, the religious nature of Saudi society allowed the *mutawwa'a* (men from Najd who obtained religious education from '*ulama*) and *ikhwan* (a religio-tribal force) to play a critical role in state formation.¹¹ Even before the discovery of oil, the role of the religious establishment was crucial for the state. According to Gause, "When the Saudi state was living hand to mouth the Wahhabi men of religion served as the regime's bureaucrats, collecting its taxes and enforcing its laws."¹² While Abdulaziz maintained a good alliance with the religious *mutawwa'in* and '*ulama*, the *ikhwan* slowly began to revolt in protest at their diminishing influence and subordinate status in the face of the growing political power of Abdulaziz. A meeting in Riyadh in the late 1920s between Abdulaziz and the '*ulama* was instrumental in putting an end to the revolt. This meeting was also important as it confirmed the relevance and importance of the religio-political alliance, especially in times of trouble. According to Al-Rasheed, "with the approval of the '*ulama*, Ibn Sa'ud was able to pacify the *ikhwan* and terminate their rebellion."¹³

However, it was during King Faisal's era that the role of the religious establishment was officially co-opted, particularly with the wealth flowing from oil revenues in the 1970s that allowed the creation of various bodies for religious institutions. While King Faisal embarked on a wide modernization process throughout the kingdom, he continued to use the religious '*ulama* to support the changes that began to sweep Saudi society. He did so by establishing different Islamic entities such as the ministry of justice and ministry of education for girls (under direct supervision of the '*ulama* at that time), and through the creation of a number of religious universities.¹⁴ This arrangement ensured that the religious establishment was part of the vast

⁹ Al-Rasheed, "Mystique of Monarchy," 46.

¹⁰ Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 48.

¹¹ Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 56.

¹² Gause, "Saudi Regimes Stability and Challenges," 35.

¹³ Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 66.

¹⁴ Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 119.

changes taking place in the kingdom, but, at the same time, its members were not expected to challenge the king, as they grew accustomed to the privileges they enjoyed in return for his support. Al-Rasheed states that “Faysal strove to incorporate the *‘ulama*. He made them part of the state and endeavoured to reward the most moderate among them, who were willing to endorse his reforms in return for concessions.”¹⁵

The process of bureaucratization might have empowered religious scholars and granted them prominence, but it has also affected the magnitude of their influence. While the incorporation of scholars into state institutions might have led to “the loss of many of their traditional functions,” it also officially helped in the “restructuring of their power and authority through the same process of bureaucratization.”¹⁶ On the other hand, the role of the religious establishment was also important as it helped establish “religious nationalism” to unify the people of the country and to provide legitimacy to the ruling family.¹⁷ According to Gause, “In exchange, they [religious scholars] gave the Al Saud their loyalty, legitimizing every controversial decision the regime made and supporting it against its critics, both domestically and internationally.”¹⁸ However, Sheikh Mohammed bin Ibrahim Al al-Sheikh, who was appointed grand mufti from 1953 until his death in 1969, repeatedly challenged royal decisions that King Faisal adopted to modernize the country. Lacroix argues that Mohammed bin Ibrahim “attacked the adoption of positive laws as an act of impiety deserving exclusion from the community of the faithful.”¹⁹ The challenges Mohammed bin Ibrahim posed to the state did not have a far-reaching impact across society; nevertheless, his death left the position of grand mufti vacant for many years as the state wanted to “limit the future capacity of the religious field to serve as a counter power.”²⁰ As a result, Abdulaziz bin Baz in 1993 was carefully chosen to limit any chances of the new appointee raising the same repeated objections to state decisions as his predecessor.²¹

While the state managed to control the influence of senior religious scholars, Saudi Islamist groups started to challenge the regime’s stability and legitimacy by taking part in a number of incidents between 1979 and 2005. In 1979, the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Juhayman Al-Otaibi made the Saudi regime realize that religious groups could mobilize and destabilize the state. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the Saudi leadership allowed foreign troops to protect its soil and to launch strikes from the kingdom. The arrival of US troops in Saudi Arabia started a discussion among Sahwa (Islamic Awakening) scholars, who saw it an attack by non-Muslims against a Muslim country. These scholars openly and repeatedly denounced the US presence on Saudi soil. The challenges posed by the Sahwa movement for years following the invasion of Kuwait had ramifications for the country’s domestic stability, which resulted in the arrests of hundreds of scholars and opposition supporters.²² Between

¹⁵ Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 120.

¹⁶ Abdullah Hamidaddin, *Tweeted Heresies: Saudi Islam in Transformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 30.

¹⁷ Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 52.

¹⁸ Gause, “Saudi Regimes Stability and Challenges,” 35.

¹⁹ Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 26.

²⁰ Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 74.

²¹ Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 75.

²² Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 3.

2003 and 2005, Saudi Arabia witnessed several attacks by Al-Qaeda that targeted residential compounds used by foreigners and other security targets. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia reached out to recently released Sahwa scholars who opposed the US presence in order to combat the new wave of terrorist attacks.²³ This demonstrates how the state continues to rely on religion to counter opponents who challenge the leadership, even if they are among the religious faction itself.

During the reign of King Abdullah (2005–15), the Saudi leadership embarked on several reforms regarding the situation of women to improve the image of the country and to relieve the soaring unemployment crisis among women. The king allowed women to work in malls, as opposed to limiting their access to jobs to the health and education sectors. This created a backlash among religious scholars and conservatives, who continued their opposition to such reforms on social media. On the other hand, Saudi women began campaigning for more rights and to lift the ban on driving.²⁴ These discussions and demands were only possible due to the limited margin of freedom of expression that King Abdullah allowed. However, the Saudi leadership at that time had to strike a balance between the two opposing forces by occasionally tilting in favor of one or the other. This allowed the authorities to monitor public debate and step in if needed, in order not to upset the delicate balance while continuing to introduce limited reforms. During King Salman's reign, such approach ran contrary to the state's new direction which aimed to promote state nationalism, curtail the influence of religious scholars, and crack down on activists calling for more rights.

THE QUESTION OF SUCCESSION

In 2007, King Abdullah created the Allegiance Council in an attempt to reach consensus among senior members of the royal family on the question of succession. Before this, the position of crown prince was usually decided by the king, without a formal process. The body was tasked with reaching an agreement regarding the succession among 34 senior members of the royal family. Towards the end of King Abdullah's reign, two of his half brothers – Prince Sultan and Prince Nayef – passed away. The two royals were in line to succeed the king; Prince Sultan was crown prince from 2005 to 2011 and Prince Nayef was crown prince from 2011 to 2012. The royals' passing "was unprecedented, as no previous king had to deal with a vacuum at the top two levels of government."²⁵ However, it also accelerated the speed of Salman's succession, who became crown prince from 2012 until he ascended to the throne in 2015. Salman's age raised speculations of the sustainability of the horizontal ruling system, especially with the passing of many of King Abdulaziz's sons. Moreover, the vacancy of the position of deputy crown prince initiated public debate on the need to introduce a younger line

²³ Eman Alhussein, "Saudi Arabia Champions 'Moderate Islam,' Underpinning Reform Efforts," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, December 15, 2020.

<https://agsiw.org/saudi-arabia-champions-moderate-islam-underpinning-reform-efforts/>.

²⁴ Namie Tsujigami, "Driving Campaigns: Saudi Women Negotiating Power in the Public Space," in *Women Rising: In and Beyond the Arab Spring*, ed. Rita Stephan and Mounira M. Charrad (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 339.

²⁵ Al-Rasheed, "Mystique of Monarchy," 56.

of royals to normalize a generational shift. Many Saudis and non-Saudis alike anticipated that the position would go to a Western-educated young royal.

As a result, the process of securing Mohammed bin Salman as next in line to the throne was not straightforward. Initially, King Salman named his half-brother Muqrin as crown prince, a title he only held for three months. In April 2015, a royal decree relieved Muqrin of his duties and appointed Mohammed bin Nayef crown prince and Mohammed bin Salman deputy crown prince. The move was significant as it was the first direct change to the horizontal succession that had been in place since the death of King Abdulaziz in 1953. The naming of Mohammed bin Nayef as crown prince was meant to normalize a new system of succession by appointing one of the most eligible grandsons of King Abdulaziz. The move was also positively met in DC, since he was a senior and well-known figure, having led the anti-terrorism campaign in the ministry of interior as an assistant interior minister from 1999 and minister of interior from 2012 to 2017. When he was appointed crown prince, Mohammed bin Nayef was named the chair of the newly established Council of Political and Security Affairs, whereas Mohammed bin Salman headed the Council of Economic and Development Affairs.

Similarly, the process of centralizing power in the hands of Mohammed bin Salman began with familiarizing the crown prince to the public through granting him various responsibilities, most notably the position of minister of defense in early 2015. As chair of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, the crown prince promised to change Saudi Arabia's rentier economy to one that could thrive without dependency on oil. At the same time, there were efforts, mostly on social media, to illustrate a continuity with the past by drawing comparisons between Mohammed bin Salman and his grandfather King Abdulaziz, the founder of the third Saudi state. This emphasis was crucial in demonstrating the start of a new era and the need for a new economic model that could move beyond oil.²⁶ In his first televised interview in 2016, Mohammed bin Salman stated that King Abdulaziz had unified the kingdom before the discovery of oil and that Saudi Arabia, through Vision 2030, can stop relying on oil by 2020.²⁷

The Allegiance Council which King Abdullah created in 2007 would play a role ten years later in voting in favor of Mohammed bin Salman as crown prince in place of Mohammed bin Nayef. While the decision was agreed upon among most royals, three voted against Mohammed bin Salman's appointment as crown prince. At that time, the media explained that the lack of overwhelming consensus was "out of protocol" as one of those who voted against the nomination was the crown prince himself, out of "humility."²⁸ Moreover, the need to demonstrate a smooth succession of power explains why video footage of Mohammed bin Nayef pledging allegiance to Mohammed bin Salman was widely circulated on social media. On the other hand, leaks revealing Mohammed bin Nayef's ineligibility for the throne due to an addiction to painkillers arising from the assassination attempt on him in 2009 would

²⁶ Eman Alhussein, "Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 19, 2019, https://ecfr.eu/publication/saudi_first_how_hyper_nationalism_is_transforming_saudi_arabia/.

²⁷ David Ottaway, "Saudi Crown Prince Gives Up on Kicking the Kingdom's Oil Addiction," *Wilson Center*, June 9, 2021. www.wilsoncenter.org/article/saudi-crown-prince-gives-kicking-kingdoms-oil-addiction.

²⁸ The National, "Saudi Arabia's Allegiance Council gives Prince Mohammed bin Salman Vote of Confidence," June 21, 2017, www.thenationalnews.com/world/saudi-arabia-s-allegiance-council-gives-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-vote-of-confidence-1.92347.

soon be covered by national and international newspapers.²⁹ As the crown prince succeeded in consolidating power, the role of the Allegiance Council has become redundant. Moreover, Prince Mishal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud headed the Allegiance Council until his death in 2017. Since his death, no one has been appointed to lead the council. The council might have been an attempt by King Abdullah to allow a wider circle of royals to be consulted on the succession of power. However, the recent changes to the line of succession demonstrate that “choosing an heir to the throne is never about eligibility or seniority; it is mainly about mediating struggle within the royal family.”³⁰

Before 2017, academics and analysts specializing in Saudi Arabia predicted the rise of a new generation of sons of former kings, to be appointed to senior roles to maintain stability and to provide a younger generation the chance to lead. This arrangement would have sustained the “committee of princes” that has long characterized the power-sharing dynamics among the royal family.³¹ However, the king’s choice of Mohammed bin Salman came as a surprise to analysts and Saudis alike. In 2020, the arrest of Prince Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz, full brother of King Salman, and former crown prince Mohammed bin Nayef further confirmed the crown prince’s quest for absolute consolidation. The elimination of the two most eligible candidates is believed to be an attempt to deter any move within the royal family to undermine the prince or turn against him.³²

DISMANTLING POWER-SHARING DYNAMICS

Over the years, the Saudi leadership tried to promote a sense of state nationalism which was lacking in the kingdom due to the domination of a pan-Islamic identity. The state’s attempts to promote national celebrations would be resisted by religious clerics, who would issue *fatwas* against taking part in such events. For example, the celebrations to mark 50 years since the capture of Riyadh were canceled in 1950 due to backlash from religious scholars who considered such an event a *bida* (innovation of religious practices). In 1999, the Saudi leadership attempted to celebrate 100 years since the capture of Riyadh, but the festivities were kept low-key due to a widely circulated *fatwa* by grand mufti Abdulaziz bin Baz.³³ These national celebrations were meant to emphasize the importance of Al Saud in capturing Riyadh and in the start of the unification process that lasted for 30 years. According to Al-Rasheed, the centennial celebrations are considered a “rite” for Saudis which “unfolds the story of a mystified past, the pre-Ibn Saud era where chaos, violence and political instability reigned among a

²⁹ Bruce Riedel, “The Case of Saudi Arabia’s Mohammed bin Nayef,” *Brookings*, February 12, 2021, www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/02/12/the-case-of-saudi-arabias-mohammed-bin-nayef/.

³⁰ Al-Rasheed, “Mystique of Monarchy,” 57.

³¹ F. Gregory Gause III, “King Salman and the Future of Saudi Arabia,” *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, 2017, 30, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep04754.6.

³² Kristin Diwan, “The Big Gamble of Mohammed bin Salman—and Saudi Arabia,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, March 23, 2020. <https://agsiw.org/the-big-gamble-of-mohammed-bin-salman-and-saudi-arabia/>.

³³ Madawi Al-Rasheed, “The Capture of Riyadh Revisited: Shaping Historical Imagination in Saudi Arabia,” in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 186.

‘fragmented’ and ‘backward’ population.”³⁴ Attempts to promote state nationalism continued with the kings that followed. When King Abdullah ascended to the throne in 2005, he made the national day a public holiday despite the backlash the decision generated among religious scholars. The celebration was meant to initiate and develop a sense of national identity, especially after the numerous attacks that struck the kingdom between 2003 and 2005. However, *fatwas* that forbade the celebration would always circulate a few days before the event to deter the public from taking part in the festivities.

The challenges the religious scholars posed to the state explain how the quest for centralization began by marginalizing and minimizing their influence. In 2016, the Saudi leadership curbed the powers of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (known informally as *Haia*), a body that is responsible for monitoring and policing public spaces for acts deemed immoral or un-Islamic. The religious police gained a negative reputation over the years, both domestically and abroad, and posed many challenges to the state’s plan to open up the country. This explains why they were the first to be targeted in the process of dismantling power-sharing dynamics. In September 2017, a crackdown on religious scholars was instrumental in the process of power centralization. The arrests were meant to send a strong message to other religious scholars who had not been included in the roundup. The scale of the arrests, and especially their targeting of scholars known across the Muslim world, made other clerics change their approach and lessen their engagement on social media. The crackdown seemed to be timed to show the crown prince’s determination to open up the country. The crackdown also took place after a period of systematic social media attacks against Sahwa scholars that began as early as 2014 and escalated months before the clampdown. According to Al-Rasheed:

By the time Mohammed ibn Salman became crown prince, the Sahwa was being blamed for all Saudis problems, especially radicalization, terrorism, corruption of faiths, intolerance of minorities, discrimination against women, unemployment, weak national identity, lack of commitment to the national interest, and preoccupation with wider Muslim issues at the expense of local concerns.³⁵

Shortly after the clampdowns, Saudi Arabia hosted the first Future Initiative Forum, an annual meeting with international investors aimed at promoting the potential of Saudi Arabia as a new regional hub for businesses. Mohammed bin Salman stated during the opening remarks that the kingdom would start adopting a “moderate Islam” approach. The crown prince said: “we are returning to what we were before—a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the world [...] We will not spend the next 30 years of our lives dealing with destructive ideas. We will destroy them today.”³⁶ The prince’s remarks were seen as justification for the arrests of clerics and intellectuals who might challenge the kingdom’s new direction. Moreover, the attempt to promote “moderate Islam” is primarily driven by the desire to demonstrate a positive image in the west while further diluting the influence of religious scholars. On the other hand, the rise of hyper-nationalism has facilitated the shift, as

³⁴ Madawi Al-Rasheed, “The Capture of Riyadh Revisited,” 194.

³⁵ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *The Son King: Reform and Repression in Saudi Arabia* (London: Hurst & Co., 2020), 155.

³⁶ Al-Arabiya, “Saudi Crown Prince Pledges to Destroy Extremism, Return to Moderate Islam,” October 24, 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2017/10/24/Saudi-Arabia-Crown-Prince-pledges-to-destroy-extremism-urges-moderate-Islam>.

it was a means to fill the void left by religious clerics.³⁷ Saudi Arabia was moving the focus of its national narrative from one that fosters “pan-Islamic transnational identity” to one that is narrowly defined and focused on a “strong local Saudi identity.”³⁸ Moreover, the marginalization of the religious establishment and the clampdown on religious scholars came in after an escalation beginning in 2014 which criminalized Islamist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, as a wider move to clamp down on terrorism. As a result, the clampdown in 2017 was seen as part of the kingdom’s ongoing efforts to tackle radicalism. Al-Rasheed states that “the government lumped together violent jihadis, radical idealogues and peaceful Islamist reformers under the wide umbrella of terrorism.”³⁹

In 2021, crown prince Mohammed bin Salman took part in a lengthy televised interview to mark five years since the launch of Vision 2030. The interview was aired on Saudi television as a means to speak directly to the local audience, unlike previous interviews that had focused on a Western audience to change public perceptions of the kingdom and to attract foreign investors and interest. During the interview, the crown prince took the liberty of explaining religious texts—uncommon among royals, as it is an intervention into the religious domain. The prince’s interpretation, after a period of crackdowns on religious scholars, demonstrates how Mohammed bin Salman has shifted the exclusivity of the religious domain and centralized it as part of the political sphere. In early 2022, a royal decree designated February 22 as Saudi Arabia’s “Founding Day” to mark the earliest establishment of the Saudi state. The choice of the year 1727 to commemorate the founding of the first Saudi state disregards the alliance between Mohammed bin Abdul Wahab and Mohammed bin Saud that took place in 1744, which facilitated the state’s expansion and acknowledged the role of religion in the process. All these developments point toward the current leadership’s interest in moving beyond the 1744 pact and the national narrative associated with it that allowed religious scholars leeway in influencing Saudi public opinion.

The crackdown on religious scholars was followed by a purge that targeted the business community as well as members of the royal family. The purge was justified as a measure to counter corruption by targeting those who benefited from the state’s contracts and business corporations. Previously, the wide networks of royals presiding over various important state entities allowed them to increase their profit and expand their wealth and influence. The inclusion of royals, among them sons of the former King Abdullah, was intended to show that the prince was going after not only corruption, but also any threat to his own succession. According to Diwan, “By 2017, the Al Salman branch of the royal family had sidelined royal rivals through a process of intimidation and governmental reorganization, tossing aside established norms of seniority and power sharing.”⁴⁰ Corruption and terrorism would soon become common charges used against opponents and critics, such as in the crackdown on women’s rights activists in 2018, which was meant to prevent the activists from taking credit for the state’s decision to lift the driving ban on women. All these measures allowed the state

³⁷ Eman Alhussein, “Saudi First.”

³⁸ Al-Rasheed, *The Son King*, 141.

³⁹ Al-Rasheed, *The Son King*, 155.

⁴⁰ Kristin Diwan, “Saudi Arabia Reassigns Roles within a More Centralized Monarchy,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, January 22, 2019, <https://agsiw.org/saudi-arabia-reassigns-roles-within-a-more-centralized-monarchy/>.

to become the sole facilitator of change and to take credit for the social opening without any criticism or competition on the grassroots level.

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF A NEW CENTRALIZED POLITICAL STRUCTURE

The Arab uprisings pushed Saudi Arabia to adopt a different approach by becoming a proactive rather than a passive player in the region. After the start of the uprising in Yemen in 2011, the kingdom managed to have former president Ali Abdullah Saleh sign the GCC Agreement for Political Transition in Yemen. However, Saudi Arabia felt abandoned by the United States, which was preoccupied with its diplomatic negotiations with Iran regarding their nuclear agreement. Saudi Arabia became more concerned with the situation in its southern borders, especially when Sanaa fell into the hands of Houthi rebels in late 2014. The decision to intervene in Yemen shortly after King Salman ascended to the throne and named Mohammed bin Salman minister of defense was therefore celebrated among Saudis and endorsed by the kingdom's regional allies.

The presidency of Donald J. Trump, and that administration's approach to the Middle East, allowed Saudi Arabia more leeway to pursue its ambitious regional agenda. Saudi Arabia imposed a blockade on Qatar, which started a Gulf crisis in June 2017 that lasted for more than three years. The blockade was lifted in early 2021 for a number of reasons, among them the end of the Trump era.⁴¹ In 2018, the centralized political structure faced another challenge with the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The state's attempts to shift the blame for the killing and divert media attention, after a period of denial, were neither sound nor convincing. As a result of the Khashoggi killing and mounting international pressure, King Salman announced the formation of a ministerial committee to restructure the security apparatus. However, he assigned Mohammed bin Salman to head the committee. According to Diwan, "The appointment of MbS [Mohammed bin Salman] to head this committee was an early indication that Saudi Arabia would not allow the Khashoggi affair to threaten his essential authority."⁴² Centralization thus continues to be the most visible characteristic of the new leadership, despite the challenges it can pose for the government and the monarchy during such crises.

On the domestic level, the massive clampdowns that began in 2017 succeeded in closing the space for public debate. Previously, social media was a space for Saudis to voice their opinion and views in light of the absence of any other means for discussion. Moreover, it was also acceptable to point the finger of blame at ministers and officials for problems within their institutions, as opposed to questioning or criticizing the royal family. Now, criticism of royals as well as state officials is no longer tolerated. The state clampdown on critics increased the mood of apprehension and fear, leading many citizens to resort to silence or pushing them to join the hyper-nationalist wave which escalated from 2017 onward following an online campaign. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's interest in nation branding is another reason for the excessive policing of social media. On the other hand, the silencing of public opinion means that the

⁴¹ BBC, "Qatar Crisis: Saudi Arabia and Allies Restore Diplomatic Ties with Emirate," January 5, 2021. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55538792.

⁴² Diwan, "Saudi Arabia Reassigns Roles."

state cannot get a sense of its citizens' grievances or needs. Previous leaderships allowed such debate to take place as a means of getting a sense of public opinion. This is not the case any more, which can make it difficult to understand the general atmosphere and to detect possible domestic instability, especially given the lack of employment opportunities and the rise in the cost of living and taxation.

The centralization of the political system is also reflected in the country's geography. King Salman was governor of Riyadh from 1963 to 2011, which explains the emphasis and attention the capital has been receiving since his ascension to the throne. In 2020, the crown prince announced plans to double the population of Riyadh from 7 million to 15 million by 2030.⁴³ This centralization carries the potential of neglecting other regions as more job opportunities are moving to the capital. At the same time, the state has allowed diverse entertainment events to take place in various parts of the country. These events are challenging the conservative population, despite the state's emphasis on the diversity of entertainment events that are offered in the kingdom's various regions. Moreover, the state's emphasis on entertainment is challenging other Gulf countries that have enjoyed attracting Saudi tourists over the years. The competition between Gulf countries is expected to intensify as they are trying to become business and tourist hubs in preparation for a post-oil era. In 2021, Saudi Arabia announced that it will terminate business contracts with foreign firms that do not have regional headquarters in the kingdom—a move against the neighboring UAE, a hub for regional offices.⁴⁴ Projects to develop the kingdom and the interest in focusing on the capital and other regions with tourism potential are playing a role in re-shaping the identities of Saudi peripheries.⁴⁵ The Saudi state's recent interest in developing pre-Islamic sites is meant to attract tourism, despite religious scholars taking a position in the past against celebrating or visiting pre-Islamic locations. Regions rich in history, such as the south, are witnessing a revival and growing appreciation of their culture whereas other regions are becoming overshadowed by the dominant central identity.

Movement away from oil and the creation of a sustainable economy has become the crown prince's promise to Saudi youth. The centralization that the political structure is enjoying today has allowed the crown prince to take various decisions to implement Vision 2030. In an interview in 2021, the crown prince said that "Nothing will be achieved without a strong state position that draws policies and sets strategies and aligns them with the different entities."⁴⁶ The challenge facing Saudi Arabia today is following through on the promises it has made to the population. In 2016 the crown prince stated that Saudi Arabia would be able to survive without oil by 2020, but in 2021 he said that Saudi Arabia remains dependent on oil. Also in 2016, minister of finance Mohammed Al-Jadaan said that the state would not impose taxes on

⁴³ Reuters, "Despite Downturn, Saudi Arabia Pursues Goal of Doubling Size of Capital City," July 7, 2020. www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-investment-riyadh-idUSKBN2481H8.

⁴⁴ Reuters, "Saudi Arabia won't Work with Foreign Firms without Regional HQ From 2024," February 15, 2021. www.reuters.com/article/saudi-company-int-idUSKBN2AF1PX.

⁴⁵ Eman Alhussein, "Vision 2030 in Saudi Peripheries: Modelling Local Identities," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, September 10, 2020. www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/vision-2030-saudi-peripheries-modelling-local-identities-27327.

⁴⁶ Reuters, "Saudi Crown Prince Says He Will Further Centralise Policy-Making," April 28, 2021. www.reuters.com/world/saudi-crown-prince-says-he-will-further-centralise-policy-making-2021-04-28/.

Saudis and residents of the kingdom.⁴⁷ However, economic challenges—from falling oil prices to the Covid-19 pandemic—changed the reality on the ground. The kingdom began imposing a 5 per cent value-added tax in 2018, which increased to 15 per cent in 2020. Saudi Arabia continues to be dependent on oil and is still struggling to create jobs for its youthful population despite promising to solve the unemployment crisis, which continues to worsen. The ambitious economic reform plans received mixed reactions, especially after the announcement of the state's plan to float shares in Saudi Arabia's oil giant, Aramco. Moreover, the continued imposition of value-added tax has taken a toll on the population. As a result, job creation will continue to be one of the challenges facing the crown prince today. Moreover, the centralization of political structure means that the leadership will be responsible for delivering on its economic promises and will have to navigate growing international scrutiny of its regional and domestic endeavors.

CONCLUSION

The process of centralizing power began with King Salman's ascension to the throne in 2015. Shortly after this, he announced a series of royal decrees to restructure the state's political system. One of the major outcomes of the reshuffling has been the dismantling of state entities and bodies that maintained the bureaucratic system and ensured power-sharing between different members of the royal family. Additionally, the king's decisions demonstrate his intention to change the process of succession in order to place his son Mohammed as next in line to the throne. Diluting the influence of religious scholars while adopting a "moderate Islam" approach has also been essential for the state's image making, for reducing clashes between differing and pre-existing religious views, and for allowing a new social opening that is contrary to religious views long held and maintained by scholars, even those close to the Royal Court.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's new political structure has affected the royal family, the religious establishment, the business elite, and the social contract between the state and its citizens. While these shifts have been instrumental in changing the succession from a horizontal to a vertical system, they have also dismantled other important state foundations that gave the royal family its security. According to Brown:

The centralization of royal authority, the consolidation of the bureaucracy, the diminution of the influence of religious scholars, and the stronger role of law originating from official (rather than religious) texts are creating a state that purports not to obstruct but instead furiously encourage such change. The crown prince is both a product of and an agent of the emerging system.⁴⁸

Moreover, the Allegiance Council, which was meant to reach consensus among senior members of the royal family on succession based on eligibility and age, has become redundant,

⁴⁷ Al-Arabiya, "Saudi Finance Minister: No Income Taxes for Saudi Citizens and Residents," December 22, 2016. <https://english.alarabiya.net/business/economy/2016/12/22/Saudi-Finance-Minister-No-income-taxes-for-Saudi-citizens-and-residents>.

⁴⁸ Nathan J. Brown, "The Remaking of the Saudi State," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 9, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/11/09/remaking-of-saudi-state-pub-74681>.

especially with news of the arrests of the royals who voted against Mohammed bin Salman in 2017.

The centralization of political power has allowed the Saudi leadership to implement numerous decisions that would otherwise have been hindered by the traditional bureaucracy that long characterized the Saudi system. Now, decisions do not need to be contested or approved by various ministries. Moreover, the curbing of the religious police, silencing of the religious establishment, and clampdowns on religious figures have muted and deterred any criticism or pushback from the religious sector. This fear has also extended to the public, especially after a number of crackdowns and arrests targeting many Saudi figures, both female and male, active in the civil rights scene. On the other hand, the new social reality has been filled with entertainment events and promises of a sustainable Saudi economy that can survive without oil. It remains to be seen how the state's economic and regional ambitions will translate on the ground without further upsetting social norms or neighborly relations.

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11. Bourdieu's social theory and the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran

Simon Mabon

INTRODUCTION

In the years since the Arab Uprisings which began in December 2010, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has played a pivotal role in the (re)construction of politics across the Middle East. The fragmentation of political projects after the emergence of protest movements created opportunities for Riyadh and Tehran to increase their influence across the Middle East through direct and indirect engagement within states. In pursuit of this aim the two states used a range of strategies, including the development of transnational networks predicated on shared ethnic or sectarian lines, and the funding of local groups engaged in conflict. From Bahrain to Lebanon, Syria to Yemen, the rivalry took on increased importance as regional politics began to shape local affairs and local affairs influenced regional politics.

Often viewed through the lens of 'proxy conflicts', Saudi and Iranian engagement across the region is more complex than the simple 'patron–client' assumptions within ideas of proxy war, with local groups asserting agency independent of broader structural constraints. Moreover, as some such as Amal Saad have argued, the very concept of the proxy conflict is problematic – another example of the imposition of Western ideas about power and the state.¹ Despite these issues, the narrative of the proxy war remains powerful, shaping policy debates and academic literature on the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

A burgeoning literature seeking to understand the rivalry has emerged in the past decade, with a smaller number of important works published in the years before the Arab Uprisings. Much of the literature on the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran focuses on the nature of this rivalry, reducing it to either a consequence of geopolitical rivalries or sectarian schisms. While some seek to position claims to religious legitimacy within the context of geopolitical rivalries – a tool to be deployed from within a leader's arsenal – few scholars have looked at the broader repercussions of the rivalry, particularly in a comparative frame. In this chapter I embark on such a task, comparing the ways in which the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran shapes political life across the Middle East.

In contrast to other approaches exploring the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, this chapter reflects on the impact of the rivalry across different spaces. Within this sense of a transnational rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran across the Middle East, it is generally accepted that five main arenas of competition exist, namely Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. The manifestation of the rivalry across these contrasting spaces differs as a consequence of the complexities and contingencies of life in these states. As a result, the manifestation of tensions

¹ Amal Saad, 'Challenging the Sponsor–Proxy Model: The Iran–Hizbullah Relationship', *Global Discourse* 9:4 (2019).

differs dramatically across the region, and to speak monolithically of this rivalry without critical reflection on its consequences is deeply problematic.

In what follows I seek to articulate the ways in which the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran plays out across the region and the factors that condition the manifestation of this rivalry in Bahrain and Lebanon. In doing so I use the work of the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu, whose ideas of capital, field and habitus provide the intellectual tools through which one can critically reflect not only on the impact of the rivalry on political contexts, but also on the ways in which the rivalry plays out. In order to do this, the chapter proceeds as follows: First, I offer background to the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, providing a brief history of the rivalry and its role in regional security, along with a discussion of the conventional approaches to understanding the rivalry. Second, I provide a short introduction to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and how his ideas can help us understand the impact of the rivalry. Third and finally, I use Bourdieu's ideas to understand the rivalry between the Saudis and Iranians across the region.

THE KINGDOM AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

The rivalry between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran is one that oscillates between periods of overt hostility and burgeoning rapprochement. Existing literature on the rivalry tends to break the genealogy of relations between the two states into five distinct periods: pre-revolution; the revolutionary aftermath; a burgeoning rapprochement; post-Iraq war; and post-Arab Uprisings.² Prior to the events of 1979, Saudi Arabia had become increasingly involved in regional affairs: empowered by rapid increases in the price of oil the Kingdom sought to counter the Pan Arab message of Gamal Abd al Nasser by exporting its Wahhabist message across the Middle East and into Asia. Amid parabolic geopolitical pressures that pulled the Kingdom into war in Yemen, officials in Riyadh continued to use petrodollars to proselytise its Islamic vision, by funding and training imams from across the Islamic world in Medina.³ Alongside the failings of the Pan Arab cause, the proliferation of this message opened new spaces of influence for Saudi Arabia, with Islamic legitimacy a central tenet of both domestic and foreign policy agendas. At this time, however, relations between the two states were largely driven by shared security concerns, reflected in the signing of a 'friendship treaty' in 1929.⁴

As war broke out between Iran and Iraq in 1980, regional politics changed dramatically, with existential concerns worrying decisionmakers in Riyadh as its two powerful neighbours – and

² While a sixth period may be emerging following talks across 2021 that culminated in the normalisation of relations in 2023, this chapter does not delve into these talks or the possibility of a new period, for reasons of brevity.

³ Michael Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith: Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Michael Farquhar, 'Saudi Petrodollars, Spiritual Capital, and the Islamic University of Medina: A Wahhabi Missionary Project in Transnational Perspective', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47:4 (2015), 701–21.

⁴ Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes* (London: Palgrave, 2016).

rivals – were pitted against each other.⁵ At this point, decisionmakers in the Kingdom faced a dilemma over the severity of threat perception, between military and ideational threats.⁶

The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran posed a serious challenge to the stability of Saudi Arabia, reaching to the very core of the Al Sauds' claims to legitimacy.⁷ While Iraq's military capacity was viewed with much trepidation, the nascent Islamic Republic threatened the architecture of the Saudi state and its ability to derive legitimacy from Islamic leadership. In the months that followed the revolution, key Iranian officials attacked the Al Sauds for corruption and impropriety; in return, Saudi officials framed the Islamic Republic as a *Persian* and *Shi'a* state, seeking to capitalise on sectarian and ethnic imbalances to consolidate their influence.

Ultimately, Saudi Arabia's position in the Persian Gulf vis-à-vis both Tehran and Baghdad was guaranteed by the US, much to the chagrin of many in Iran who believed that Gulf security should be constructed by those within the area.⁸ While the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran oscillated, as noted, between periods of hostility and burgeoning rapprochement, the role of the US served as a constant source of contention, seen in diametrically opposed ways. Competing visions concerning the organisation of regional security in the years after the revolution were fundamental in shaping hostility. For ministers in Tehran, regional security in the Gulf should be constructed through interactions of those states found in the Gulf. In contrast, ministers in Riyadh were reliant upon the US as a guarantor of regional security.

Despite this, after the end of the Iraq War, relations across the Gulf began to improve.⁹ This thaw in tensions was partially a result of the death of erstwhile Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini, the architect of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini's death created a space for dialogue between Iran and its neighbours, with the toning down of belligerent rhetoric and the emergence of more reform-minded political figures such as Akbar Hoshemi Rafsanjani. In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abd al Aziz was receptive to such moves, resulting in a period of burgeoning rapprochement which lasted until 2003.

Following the US-led invasion of Iraq, relations between Tehran and Riyadh deteriorated dramatically.¹⁰ The presence of a US force in Iraq was viewed with great suspicion by many Iranians who were concerned about a larger American military presence in the Gulf. The toppling of Saddam Hussein and the evisceration of Ba'ath infrastructure from Iraq opened up a new front in the struggle between Riyadh and Tehran. Increased Iranian influence and an apparent 'Shi'a resurgence' prompted fear among many Sunnis.¹¹ As Iraq descended into

⁵ Fred Halliday, *Nation and Religion in the Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2000).

⁶ May Darwich, *Threats and Alliances in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁷ Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: IB Tauris, 2013).

⁸ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran–Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order* (London: OUP for IISS, 1996).

⁹ Simon Mabon, *The Struggle for Supremacy: Saudi Arabia and Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023) and Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁰ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*; Frederic Wehrey et al., *Saudi–Iranian Relations since the Fall of Saddam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporations, 2009).

¹¹ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006). See also Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: Routledge, 2013).

civil war, Riyadh and Tehran provided material and ideational support to particular groups in an effort to assert dominance. At this time, with Iranian influence in the ascendancy, key Saudi officials urged the US to launch a military strike against Iran, best evidenced in King Abdullah's infamous call for Washington to 'cut off the head of the snake'.¹² While the civil war ended, violence between communal groups and a political and socio-economic struggle continued to shape Iraq.

The escalation of the Arab Uprisings in early 2011 opened up new arenas of competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. As popular protests spread across the region, relations between rulers and ruled were dramatically shaken, creating opportunities to reshape the nature of political life. In response to such calls, rulers typically resorted to violent repression, exacerbating political grievances while also entrenching sectarian difference through processes of sectarianisation. In states divided along ethno-sectarian lines, such events typically involved the cultivation of relations with regional powers in a quest to ensure survival and increase influence.¹³

From 2011 onwards, competition to shape a precarious political landscape fused domestic and regional aspirations. Here, political ambitions – both domestic and regional – became mapped onto sectarianised identity markers, further fusing domestic and regional concerns. In this environment, Saudi Arabia and Iran provided support both to embattled allies and to opportunistic actors seeking to increase their influence. As such, it is hardly surprising that the fallout from the Arab Uprisings had a dramatic impact on the regional security environment and the way in which Saudi Arabia – and others – engaged in security calculations. The fall of long-standing Saudi allies posed a clear strategic challenge, leading to the sectarianisation of regional politics in an attempt to capitalise on long-standing fears of the Shi'a – and by extension Iranian – other, with devastating repercussions.

UNDERSTANDING THE RIVALRY

Efforts to understand these developments typically fall into three camps. The first suggests that tensions between the two states stem from competition over regional security. Couched in Realist understandings of international relations, such approaches position questions of security at the heart of tensions. For Saudi Arabia, Iranian activity after the 1979 revolution provoked existential concerns about its survival, prompting a doubling down in Riyadh's relationship with the US. In contrast, for Iran, Middle Eastern security should be achieved by those within the region; the presence of the US exacerbates existing security concerns. While there are clear security issues at play, such an approach fails to account for the salience of identity.¹⁴

¹² Simon Mabon, 'Muting the Trumpets of Sabotage: Saudi Arabia, the US and the Quest to Securitize Iran', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45:5 (2018), 742–59.

¹³ Ibid. See also Simon Mabon, *Houses Built on Sand* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Shahram Akbarzadeh, 'Iran and Daesh: The Case of a Reluctant Shia Power', *Middle East Policy*, 22:3 (2015) 44–54.

¹⁴ Henner Furtig, *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia Between the Gulf Wars* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2006); Chubin and Tripp, *Iran–Saudi Arabia Relations*; Banafsheh Keynough, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*; Robert Mason, *Foreign Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia: Economics and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Gregory Gause, 'Saudi Arabia and Regional Leadership: The Impossibility of Hegemony', *Middle East Insights* 243 (2020).

In contrast, the second camp views sectarian difference as the reason for tensions, holding primordialist views of sectarian difference which date tensions between Sunni and Shi'a to the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. This camp suggests that immutable sectarian identities map onto modern states, leading to the contemporary manifestation of 'ancient hatreds'. This vitriolic difference creates a position where the deployment of claims to religious legitimacy or leadership exacerbates tensions between the two states.¹⁵

Although the Saudi Kingdom is a monarchy, the ruling Al Saud family operates as the custodians of the two holy places, deriving Islamic legitimacy from protecting those who make hajj to Mecca and Medina. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the system of *veleyat-e faqih* – the Regency of the Jurist – is in operation in the absence of the 12th Imam. Devised by Ruhollah Khomeini, *veleyat-e faqih* is a system of government that ensures compliance with Islam, with senior clerics overseeing all aspects of political life. Yet this proved to be a controversial decision, moving against traditional Shi'a views which called for a separation between religion and politics. A direct consequence of this is tension between the major seats of Shi'a teaching, Qom in Iran and Najaf in Iraq, adding an intra-Shi'a dimension to regional affairs which is further complicated by Arab–Persian tensions.

Although religion plays a significant role in both states, such an approach holds a deeply problematic view of identity, while also failing to account for the evolving nature of relations between the two states. Indeed, critics of the primordialist position point to a static view of identity which neither evolves over time nor allows for other identity markers to interact and take precedence at particular times. In the case of the Saudi–Iranian rivalry, while religion is undeniably important, so too are ethnic identities (Arab–Persian), political identities (monarchist, Islamist/republican), class identities, regional identities and tribal identities. Moreover, the form of Islam prevalent in the Saudi Arabia of the present day is dramatically different from the form of Islam prevalent 90 years earlier under Ibn Saud.

A third position suggests that both security concerns and religious competition are central in understanding the rivalry. As religion is positioned prominently within the political fabric of each state and regularly used as a means of laying claim to legitimacy, claims to leadership of the Muslim world are undertaken to demonstrate both religious piety and political vitality, framing events in ways that suit their political and geopolitical ambitions. This position allows for a nuanced understanding of efforts to shape space through the deployment of material and ideational resources; in particular, religion.¹⁶

While the third camp has gained prominence among those looking at the rivalry, other work has sought to position the rivalry within broader discussions of regional security and/or alliance formation. From such a position, efforts to understand regional security have often framed events as a consequence of shared ideational factors. Yet such a view fails to address the complexity of alliance construction in the region. Indeed, the traditional Realist account of the balance of power and bandwagoning would result in an alliance composed of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel against Iran. Instead, as Gause suggests that the concept of underbalancing might offer a more persuasive account of regional politics. Drawing on ideas presented by Mark Haas, Gause argues that while power plays a prominent role in the international system, identity also structures the system. Where there are instances of ideological multipolarity,

¹⁵ See Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival*.

¹⁶ Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*; see also Lawrence Rubin, *Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics* (Stanford: Stanford Security Studies, 2014).

leaders may eschew alliances that provide security and stability as a consequence of ideological differences or competing visions of regional order. Where systems are characterised by bipolarity, 'alliances will tend to follow ideological lines and be very stable. But when there are more than two transnational ideological principles present in the system, being put forward by great powers, the likelihood of underbalancing increases'.¹⁷

Although a growing body of literature exists looking at the rivalry between the two major Gulf powers and their role within regional security calculations, little work has been produced looking at the ways in which the rivalry plays out across time and space. Some have referred to the existence of 'proxy wars' as a way of articulating the spatial repercussions of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.¹⁸ Such an approach typically argues that Riyadh and Tehran have cultivated cross-border relationships with local groups – typically of the same sectarian identity – in pursuit of broader geopolitical aims. Proponents of such a position often point to Hizballah as an example of an Iranian proxy, here operating in Lebanon. Popular mobilisation units in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, or political blocs in Lebanon all provide additional examples to support these claims. Yet as Amal Saad and others have persuasively argued, such an approach reduces complex transnational relationships to overly simplistic – and Orientalist – power relationships.¹⁹

Across the Middle East, local dynamics have long been shaped by regional trends, while regional politics has also been conditioned by developments within states, exacerbating conditions of permeability emerging from the nature of political organisation. Processes of state formation have created fluid and amorphous conditions which include structural discrimination but which are not fixed and evolve, shaped by the context specific contingencies of time and space. Amid widespread divisions, it is hardly surprising that political organisation across the state has been characterised by contestation and efforts to both regulate life and ensure the regime survival. The construction of space takes place through the interaction of broad, hegemonic narratives with the local and "intimately tiny".²⁰ With that in mind, to understand the (re)construction of space we must look at how the regional clashes with the local. Moreover, we must consider the extent to which domestic factors shape foreign policy, which, in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, is of paramount importance.

¹⁷ F. Gregory Gause III, 'Ideologies, Alliances, and Underbalancing in the New Middle East Cold War', in *International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East*, Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) Studies 16 (2015), 16–20; F. Gregory Gause III, 'Balancing What? Threat Perceptions and Alliance Choice in the Gulf', *Security Studies* 13:2 (2003/4), 273–305; Mark L. Haas, 'Ideological Polarity and Balancing in Great Power Politics', *Security Studies* 23:4 (2014), 715–53; Richard Harknett and Jeffrey Vandenberg, 'Alignment Theory and Interrelated Threats: Jordan and the Persian Gulf Crisis', *Security Studies* 6:3 (1997), 112–53; Randall Schweller, 'Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing', *International Security* 29:2 (2004), 159–201; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

¹⁸ See, for example, Max Fisher, 'How the Iranian–Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East', *New York Times*, 20 November 2016. www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-proxy-war.html.

¹⁹ Saad, 'Challenging the Sponsor–Proxy Model'.

²⁰ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), 9–11.

BOURDIEU AND SOCIAL THEORY IN APPLICATION

In an effort to understand the impact of the rivalry on states across the region, it is important to consider the ways in which Riyadh and Tehran shape domestic politics. In pursuit of this aim, I now turn to the work of the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's work offers a relational approach to understanding power and domination and, also, to tracing change over time. In doing this, Bourdieu's approach challenges the ahistorical existence of identities and, similarly, the territorial trap of the state.²¹

To do so, Bourdieu deploys a series of concepts that facilitate this relational analysis and the interplay between actors. For Bourdieu, competition and contestation take place within fields, which are 'relatively autonomous social microcosms'.²² For Bourdieu the field is fundamentally relational, an arena that is formed by the interaction of relations between positions that are 'objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions'. The field is a site of contestation, of struggle, between relational positions that seek to transform or preserve the configuration of positions.

Fields occur at different levels of analysis, ranging from the field of disciplinary study – Bourdieu uses the discipline of art – to the political field and, cutting across state borders, the transnational field.²³ While interrelated, and often shaping others, fields are differentiated from one another and defined by the nature of the competition that takes place; the borders of the field are defined by competition. States are forged by the interplay of different fields, albeit dominated by the political field due to its ability to assert dominance and impose visions of order on the social world.

For the purposes of this study, two fields are central to the analysis: the political field and the transnational field. The political field is of importance for Bourdieu due to its ability to shape or define the nature of the social world while the transnational field is of importance for our study because of the cross-border nature of religion, identity, economic linkages, security concerns and visions of order. Although prominent features of the transnational field, these factors also resonate within domestic political fields, shaping reserves of capital.

Within fields, actors compete to assert capital in an effort to impose visions of order within the field and broader social world. This vision of order is achieved by having the ability to define the social 'principles of vision and division'. Capital emerges in different forms, including (but not limited to) economic, social, coercive, religious and cultural capital, with reserves of capital giving actors the ability to define principles of vision. Over time, this broader competition and the nature of principles of vision and division create a habitus that shape the actions of individuals. This idea of habitus is similar to a broader context within which actors operate, conditioning thought, word and deed. Alongside these principles of vision and division, actors seek to define the habitus, 'a system of schema [that] constantly orient choices,

²¹ The territorial trap, initially articulated by John Agnew. John Agnew, 'The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory', *Review of International Political Economy* 1:1 (1994), 53–8.

²² Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 97.

²³ Although largely undertheorised by Bourdieu himself, the concept of the field is not territorially fixed, nor is it methodologically nationalist. For more on this see Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, 'Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology', *The International Migration Review* 37:3 (2003), 576–610.

which though not deliberate, are nonetheless systematic; which without being arranged and organized expressly according to an ultimate end, are nonetheless imbued with a sort of finality that reveals itself only *post festum*'.²⁴ At its core, an individual's habitus shapes their engagement with the world around them, determining actions, word and deed.

Our study is concerned with competition to shape political and transnational fields and to impose particular visions of vision and division on the social world. To do this, Saudi Arabia and Iran use a range of different forms of capital, notably religious, economic, coercive and ideological capital, conditioned by the field in which the contestation occurs. The contrasting nature of fields means that certain forms of capital resonate over others in certain times and places.

While some suggest that the field is inherently bound up with the territorial borders of the nation state, this is a misreading of Bourdieu's work. While not explicitly examining the nature of the transnational field in any real detail, Bourdieu is keen to stress that fields are not territorially fixed, meaning that charges of methodological nationalism are infelicitous. Exploration of the religious field serves to support this, seen in the salience of religious identity crossing state borders. From this, as a growing number of scholars have highlighted, exploration of the transnational field is a legitimate line of scholarly inquiry within the study of Bourdieu's social theory.²⁵ Moreover, when applied to the Middle East, it is clear to see that such an approach is conceptually and empirically important when looking at the interplay between regional and domestic politics. From the competition to define Arab Nationalism to Pan-Islamism and, more recently, sectarianisation, restricting analysis to the domestic level misses much from the analysis. Indeed, actors in the transnational field may possess capital which resonates within domestic political fields, allowing them to engage in a relational struggle to assert the principles of vision and division and to define the habitus. As a result, we see the complex interplay of different fields at different levels of analysis, shaped by relational positions within – and across – fields which define the character and the borders of fields. It may be that such fields are nested – similar to the concept of nested sovereignty – although such an exploration is beyond the scope of this intervention.

THE QUEST FOR ORDER: CONTESTING CAPITAL

Let us now consider the ways in which the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran plays out across the Middle East. In doing this, Bourdieu's ideas of field and capital offer useful analytical tools to critically interrogate the actions of Riyadh and Tehran. Before turning to an exploration of the impact of the rivalry within states, it is necessary to look at regional developments – what I call the transnational field – which condition the ways in which Riyadh and Tehran engage within and across state borders.

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Postface' to Erwin Panofsky, *Architecture gothique et pensée scolastique* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), 161.

²⁵ Monika Krause, 'How Transnational Fields Vary', Paper delivered at the IR Theory Seminar, International Relations Department, London School of Economics and Political Science, 12 March 2018. See also Yves Dezalay and Bryant G. Garth, 'Hegemonic Battles, Professional Rivalries, and the International Division of Labor in the Market for the Import and Export of State-Governing Expertise', *International Political Sociology* 5:3 (2011).

Transnational Field

Competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran at a regional level can be analysed by viewing the Middle East's regional security environment as a transnational field. This field is defined by the interplay of politics, religion, identity incongruence, socio-economic issues, ideational factors and security concerns. Here, efforts to define principles of vision and division are conditioned by religious competition and concerns about the ordering of regional security. As a consequence, efforts to impose principles of vision and division involve the deployment of different forms of capital – notably religious, political, coercive and ideological – creating a complex transnational field that is shaped by the interplay of a range of different actors.

Competition to define the principles of vision and division emerges from an environment that is increasingly divided along sectarian lines. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic, geopolitically charged sectarian difference took on greater importance within the political calculations of states across the region. Developments across the region exacerbated this difference. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, King Abdullah II of Jordan's remarks about a 'Shi'a Crescent' point to a growing suspicion about Tehran's regional intentions and also the loyalties of Shi'a communities.²⁶ Abdullah's remarks offer insight into the worries of many Arab leaders, particularly those with Shi'a populations, amid concerns of divided loyalties and potential fifth columnists. Such comments were also a product of an increasingly anti-Iranian and anti-Shi'a habitus, reflecting decades of marginalisation and suspicion which ultimately enabled particular forms of capital to resonate within political fields.

What is important for our inquiry here is the way in which a transnational field conditions developments within political fields of particular states. For example, the Bahraini political field is conditioned by the organisation of the transnational field. This conditioning is brought about by the relational arrangement of actors in the transnational field, the types of capital deployed by those actors and the habitus within which actors operate. Central to the organisation of the transnational field are reserves of capital which resonate across state borders; historically this has included Arabism, Islam, tribalism and independence movements.

Actors in a domestic political field are also situated within this transnational field, stemming from the salience of religion and concerns about regional security. The habitus of the transnational field and competition to shape principles of vision and division shape the actions of actors in the domestic political field. The porous borders of the political field may also allow transnational actors who have reserves of capital to engage in competition for influence and to shape the habitus. As such, actors such as Saudi Arabia and Iran – both of whom have reserves of capital (political, religious, economic and coercive) – regularly engage in competition to shape domestic political fields alongside the transnational field.

DOMESTIC COMPETITION: LEBANON AND BAHRAIN

In both Lebanon and Bahrain, local politics has been shaped by developments across the regional security environment, while regional politics have also been conditioned by developments in the political fields of Bahrain and Lebanon. This permeability of political fields

²⁶ Such comments can also be found almost a century earlier in remarks made by Gertrude Bell. See Gertrude Bell, *A Woman in Arabia: The Writings of the Queen of the Desert* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

allows external actors to compete for influence, deploying different forms of capital in pursuit of their goals, demonstrating the importance of developments in domestic political fields for the construction of the transnational field and vice versa. Domestic political fields in Bahrain and Lebanon are shaped by competition by actors with different forms of capital. Social divisions in both states typically occur between Sunni and Shi'a, although in Lebanon competition is made more complex by the presence of Christian and Druze populations, while divisions in Bahrain are exacerbated by tribal and ethnic competition. These social divisions, and ensuing competition in the domestic political field, create space for regional powers to assert influence. The structure of political organisation in Bahrain and Lebanon created scope for different forms of external engagement in the political field, ranging from involvement in electoral politics to coercive activities in support of local allies. Such activities are made possible by the nature of the political field and the level of capital wielded by actors seeking to define principles of vision and division.

Lebanon's Political Field

Lebanese politics has typically been viewed through the neologism of sectarianism, a concept born in the age of nationalism and operating as the antithesis of nationhood.²⁷ Sectarianism plays a prominent role in the ordering of life across Lebanon, from its power-sharing system designed to give confessional groups access to the political system in an effort to prevent further conflict, to the organisation of urban spaces across the state.²⁸ The power-sharing system distributed key offices of state across Sunni, Shi'a and Christian communities, creating a precarious political environment that was largely inert and often in conditions of stalemate, prompting some to refer to it as a form of 'zombie powersharing'.²⁹

The emergence of sectarian blocs means that Lebanese domestic parties often have regional supporters. In the aftermath of the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in 2005, this became more formalised with the establishment of the March 8 and March 14 blocs.³⁰ These blocs derived support from Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively, who had long deployed political, economic and religious capital in support of their Lebanese allies, best seen in the emergence of Hizballah in the 1980s and the burgeoning power of Rafiq Hariri's *Solidere* in the 1990s.³¹

Iranian influence in Lebanon was a result of its religious capital and the projection of a narrative of resistance which resonated among many. Tehran's role in establishing Hizballah across the 1980s meant that the Islamic Republic was viewed favourably by many, particularly those in the south who had endured economic hardship and precarious living conditions after Israeli military incursions.

²⁷ Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

²⁸ See the work of Melani Cammett, Sara Fregonese, Hiba Bou Akar, Bassel Salloukh, John Nagel, Mona Harb, Mona Fawaz and Joanna Rand Nucho among others.

²⁹ John Nagle, 'Consociationalism is Dead! Long Live Zombie Power-Sharing', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 20:2 (2020), 137–44.

³⁰ Imad Salamey, 'The Double Movement & Post-Arab Spring Consociationalism', *Muslim World* 106:1 (2016), 187–204.

³¹ On Iran–Hizballah see Edward Wastnidge, 'The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War', *Politics* 35:3/4 (2015), 364–77, and on Saudi Arabia–Solidere/Hariri see Hannes Baumann, *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon's Neo-Liberal Reconstruction* (London: Hurst, 2016).

In addition to a precarious political landscape, the Lebanese state faced serious economic challenges which also facilitated the presence of regional powers in the political field. The deployment of different forms of capital also allowed the March 8 and March 14 blocs to circumvent financial pressures to provide support for their own communities.³² The long-standing penetration of the Lebanese economy and reliance on external powers left it vulnerable to such moves. Saudi Arabia has a long history of engagement in the Lebanese economy, providing aid, loans, investment in real estate and construction and a regular flow of tourists holidaying on the shores of the Mediterranean, bringing welcome capital to Lebanese banks. This was also supported by close relations between the ruling family and Sunni elites across the state, notably the Hariris. In contrast, Iranian support predominantly went through Hizballah. Yet, after the Israeli destruction of the Dahiyeh suburb of Beirut during the summer war of 2006, competition between the Saudis and Iranians played out in reconstruction efforts, prompting what Emilie Combaz called a ‘development and reconstruction proxy war’.³³

Although vast economic investment followed the 2006 war and built on the deeply unpopular process of reconstruction led by Rafiq Hariri’s *Solidere* company, the Lebanese economy endured a tumultuous period, relying upon what the Banque du Liban has described as ‘financial engineering’ in order to keep the necessary flow of dollars into government coffers to maintain foreign currency reserves. Those able to wield economic capital were thus able to deploy it for political ends, such as the Saudi decision to withhold funds from the Lebanese Armed Forces amid concerns at the rising influence of Hizballah and, by extension, Iran. Although Saudi economic capital dwarfed that offered by Iran, Tehran’s cultural and symbolic capital meant that its efforts were generally viewed more favourably.³⁴ Saudi capital in Lebanon’s political field was historically bound up with the capital of the Hariris, but in the years after the assassination of Rafiq, a gradual decline of the Hariri–Saudi relationship took place, culminating in Saad Hariri’s fateful trip to Riyadh in 2017.

Riyadh’s ability to induce the resignation of Lebanon’s Prime Minister reveals the levels of economic and coercive capital that Saudi Arabia wields in Lebanon’s political field. Central to the Saudi actions was a desire to curtail the influence of Hizballah in the Lebanese political field, which is a component of a broader attempt to assert dominance over the transnational field. The Party of God’s religious and social capital meant it was well placed to dominate the Lebanese political field, while the weakness and apparent ineptitude of Saudi allies to counter Hizballah was a source of much frustration to Riyadh. Although Hariri rescinded his resignation upon his return to Beirut, his own reserves of capital were depleted, both across the political field and within his own constituency.

Ultimately, however, after decades of economic crises, endemic corruption, nepotism, bureaucratic inertia and political failings, propping up both March 8 and March 14 camps – along with the sectarian power-sharing system – the emergence of a widespread protest

³² Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

³³ Emilie Combaz, ‘International Aid to Lebanon’, *Governance, Social Development, Humanitarian, Conflict*, GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report (2013), 5.

³⁴ Roger Mac Ginty and C.S. Hamieh, ‘Lebanon Case Study’, in *Diversity in Donorship: Field Lessons*, Report 30, ed. A. Harmer and E. Martin, 39–48 (ODI: Humanitarian Policy Group, 2010). www.odhpn.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/5876.pdf p40; and Christine Sylva Hamieh and Roger Mac Ginty, ‘A Very Political Reconstruction: Governance and Reconstruction in Lebanon after the 2006 War’, *Disasters* 34:1 (2010), 106.

movement in October 2019 posed an existential challenge to the ordering of political life and the involvement of external powers in the Lebanese state. This anger was exacerbated by the dramatic deterioration of the Lebanese economy, the impact of Covid-19, and a devastating blast in Beirut. In what followed, the Lebanese political field became a site of complex competition between those opposed to the power-sharing agreement (a large protest movement) and the various politico-sectarian groups, with their regional backers. Despite the widespread anger at the penetration of Lebanese politics by Saudi Arabia and Iran, Riyadh and Tehran continued efforts to influence the political field, albeit in the Saudi case having to look beyond traditional allies as their capital dwindled.

Bahrain's Political Field

Efforts to define principles of vision and division in Bahrain's political field have been dominated by the ruling Al Khalifa family and their Saudi backers.³⁵ Described by some as the epicentre of geopolitical competition and sectarian schisms, there is little doubt that Bahrain's political field has been shaped by regional developments, while developments across the island have also fed into the cultivation of regional politics.³⁶ Competition to dominate Bahrain's political field brings together actors with different forms of capital – economic, social, political, coercive, religious – which reflects the complex social fabric of the state.³⁷ Despite its small population – some estimates place its population at around 1.8 million, although without census data precise figures are hard to find – Bahrain is home to a range of different ethnic, religious, tribal, political and socio-economic groups, each of whom wants to dominate the political field.³⁸ As such, efforts to assert principles of vision seek to cut across these different identities, meaning that economic, religious and coercive capital are typically the most effective forms.

Much of the contestation in Bahrain's political field concerns the actions of the majority Shi'a population, who are regularly framed as Iranian fifth columnists.³⁹ Fears about the manipulation of schisms along sect-based lines have long shaped the actions of Bahrain's ruling Al Khalifa family, prompting actions that have resonated regionally because of broader geopolitical rivalries. We should not, however, view this discord as a continuous, static phenomenon. Indeed, sectarian difference in Bahrain, like elsewhere, plays out in myriad forms, across different temporal and spatial arenas and with varying intensities.⁴⁰

³⁵ Kristin Diwan Smith, 'Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf', in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence Potter (London: Hurst, 2013).

³⁶ Simon Mabon, 'The End of the Battle for Bahrain and the Securitization of Bahraini Shi'a', *The Middle East Journal* 73:1 (2019), 29–50.

³⁷ Simon Mabon, 'Protest, Sects, and the Potential for Power-Sharing in Bahrain', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 20:2 (2020), 161–8.

³⁸ Omar H. AlShehabi, *Contested Modernity: Sectarianism, Nationalism and Colonialism in Bahrain* (London: Oneworld, 2019).

³⁹ Mabon, *The End of the Battle*.

⁴⁰ Se: Justin Gengler, 'Royal Factionalism, the Khawalid, and the Securitization of 'the Shi'a Problem' in Bahrain', *Journal of Arabian Studies* 3:1 (2013), 53–79; Marc Owen Jones, *Political Repression in Bahrain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Toby Matthiessen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that Wasn't* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

Bahrain has a long Shi'a presence which pre-dates the Persian conversion to Shi'a Islam. Yet the establishment of an Islamic Republic in 1979 would have a great impact on Bahrain's Shi'a population. Although a large percentage of the clerics had been trained in Qom and thus possess links with Iran, the structure and organisation of Shi'a Islam permits following different *marja*, with Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani possessing a great deal more religious legitimacy than Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Iran. In such a climate, clerics also compete for influence.⁴¹ Despite this, the Iranian Supreme Leader has a representative in Bahrain who collects zakat, which exacerbates fears about nefarious Iranian actions circulating among the ruling family, Saudi Arabia and others.

Concerns at the loyalties of Bahraini Shi'a and the possibility of Iranian manipulation of the island's politics have prompted Saudi Arabia to strengthen ties with the ruling Al Khalifa.⁴² This was seen most obviously in the development of the King Fahd causeway, ostensibly built to develop trade ties between the two Kingdoms but in reality designed to allow Saudi forces rapid military access in the event of an Iranian incursion.⁴³

Supporting this is the provision of vast economic capital to the Al Khalifa to support their rule, which, in turn, has been distributed across regime loyalists. In contrast to the carrot of economic capital, the stick of coercive capital has regularly been used to restrict the capacity of groups to engage in acts of resistance. This included legal restrictions, uricide and the violent repression of protesters; while such strategies were not new, they gained fresh impetus after the onset of protests.⁴⁴

Underpinning the deployment of capital is a deeply anti-Shi'a habitus, forged over the preceding decades and manifesting in education and widespread structural violence. Pointing out over downtown Manama, one Bahraini businessman observed to me that 'the Persians are everywhere'. This habitus is a product not just of Al Khalifa sectarianisation efforts, but also broader developments in the transnational field, where Saudi-led efforts to securitise Iran – supported by regional allies – helped establish anti-Iranian and anti-Shi'a principles of vision across the region.

CONCLUSIONS

This intervention has sought to demonstrate two things: first, the importance of looking at the ways in which the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran plays out across the region, or, put another way, the spatial repercussions of the rivalry; second, the utility of the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu in understanding the ways in which the Saudi–Iranian rivalry manifests in regional politics.

Theoretically, Bourdieu's ideas of *field*, *capital* and *habitus* help to better understand the interplay between actors at different levels of analysis and the ways in which this interplay manifests in competition and contestation. More work is required, however, exploring the con-

⁴¹ Rashed Alrasheed and Simon Mabon, 'Fatwas and Politics in Bahrain: Exploring the Post 2011 Context', *Middle Eastern Studies* 57:1 (2021), 151–65.

⁴² Mabon, *The End of the Battle*.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Abdulhadi Khalaf, 'Contentious Politics in Bahrain: From Ethnic to National and Vice Versa', Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies, 1998. <https://org.uib.no/smi/pao/khalaf.html>.

ceptual interplay between *fields* at different levels of analysis, namely the domestic political field and the transnational field, and in particular the ways in which regional powers engaging in the transnational field operate in the domestic political field. The salience of particular forms of capital within and between fields is apparent given the importance of religion, ethnicity, ideas of resistance and economic capital, but more work is required which critically reflects on the contextual factors shaping the deployment of such capital across fields and states.

One final point concerns the 2019 events in Iraq and Lebanon, where protesters have taken to the streets demanding political reform in a process of de-sectarianisation. With protesters re-imagining the role of religious identities, it remains to be seen to what extent external forces will be able to exert influence and how these processes shape political fields and reserves of capital. In both states there has been chanting aimed at Iran, amid charges of corruption, economic mismanagement and other issues embedded within sectarian politics. Central to this are accusations that Iran has failed in translating its victories and narrative of resistance into a pragmatic process that can feed people. Such an observation highlights the importance of local agency in understanding regional politics and, once again, stresses the need to move beyond the proxy wars thesis.

At its heart, this chapter has endeavoured to show how the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia plays out across and within different states, where the nature of the rivalry is conditioned by the relational competition to determine the nature of the political field. As a result of different forms of competition across political fields, the rivalry between the two states differs contingent upon the complexities and contingencies of time and space. As a result, to understand the ways in which the rivalry plays out, it is important to consider not only the factors driving the rivalry from within the Kingdom and Islamic Republic and the character of the transnational field, but also the nature of competition within domestic fields across the region. In doing this, a more nuanced approach is provided which factors in different forms of competition, moving beyond the problematic 'proxy wars' thesis and a simplistic 'patron-client' understanding of the interplay between regional powers and local actors.

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12. External powers in the Middle East: views from within the region

Guy Burton

INTRODUCTION

How are external powers perceived in the Middle East? How have regional states responded to their agendas? Such questions are pertinent given the increasingly multipolar nature of both global and regional politics. To address them, after this introduction, the chapter's first main section summarises the current state of the Middle East today (including the role of its hegemonic power, the United States) and the foreign policy positions of the principal regional powers in relation to their security concerns and each other. The second section then sets out the stance of the other significant external Western and non-Western powers in the Middle East today, and the response by regional powers. The concluding section notes that the American decline has been relative rather than absolute, and that it remains the preponderant external power for now. However, the multipolar nature of global and regional international systems has meant that states have sought to spread risk and pursue any opportunities available to them, which has resulted in a policy of strategic ambiguity, or 'hedging'. Moreover, this looks set to continue, so long as the region remains both unstable and its future uncertain.

THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY AND ITS REGIONAL POWERS

The situation in the Middle East echoes the wider global system. Overall, international politics appears to be moving away from a US-dominated order and institutions based on its liberal principles and values. Increasingly, the world is taking on a more multipolar hue, in which a number of different powers and narratives are on the rise, leaving the US and its liberal order as one among many.¹

American decline since its heyday in the immediate post-Cold War period, when it became the sole hegemonic power, has several roots. In the Middle East it became embedded following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War. As well as increasing American military presence, the US became an active mediator in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Later, the 9/11 attacks shifted Washington's stance toward the region as then-President Bush adopted unilateralism when deciding to invade Iraq in 2003, ostensibly on the grounds of removing its weapons of mass destruction.²

¹ Amitav Acharya, 'After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order', *Ethics & International Affairs* 31:3 (2017): 271–85.

² Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016): 334–5.

Although the US easily ejected Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq, it failed to establish order and security there. Instead, an insurgency took hold and undermined American efforts to build a democracy. American prestige was sapped further by the ethnic strife and sectarianism that was unleashed via the democratic experiment introduced in Iraq too.

American confidence was further sapped in the wake of the 2008–9 financial crisis. Both the country and the world's financial system, which was modeled in its own image, was brought to the brink of collapse. After a massive bailout, the US and other historic world powers, such as the Europeans, undertook a period of fiscal retrenchment that cut into their international influence.

Meanwhile, the Middle East experienced its own convulsions, especially following the uprisings in 2011. Although this caught many by surprise, there was plenty of evidence that regional elites faced growing challenges that alienated them from their populations, from a lack of economic and employment opportunities to the deteriorating provision and quality of public services.³

Autocrats were overthrown in Tunisia and Egypt, while in the monarchies ruling elites coopted societies by boosting subsidies. Meanwhile, in Libya and Syria, leaders' refusal to step down and their use of repression fractured the relationship between state and society; dissenters sought arms, leading to growing insurgency.⁴ Alongside the power vacuum in these countries, the American response was muted; this offered space for regional powers to insert themselves and back proxies to advance their own interests.

The changing nature of the Middle East has affected all its principal powers, from American partners and allies such as Israel and the Arab Gulf monarchies to rivals such as Iran. Among Israel's political class, which had long viewed the region in a starkly realist manner, skepticism grew towards the changes taking place.⁵ Perhaps to that end, then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emphasised Israel's apparent isolation and need for self-reliance, especially in light of Iran's nuclear programme, which was portrayed in apocalyptic terms. At the same time, however, Israel's sense of aloneness must be set against its own strong military capacity and backing from the US.

Like Israel, several of the Arab Gulf states were also fearful for their regimes' security. Although the economic weight of the Middle East had shifted to the Gulf through the wealth generated by their production of oil and gas, the rise of these states had not resulted in any corresponding increase in their security. Saudi Arabia, for instance, is 'unconventional' in being economically strong but militarily weak.⁶ Because of that, Saudi foreign policy had long been played out at three different levels: at the international level, where it employs its oil power and its alliance with the US; at the regional level, where it sees Iran and its nuclear program,

³ UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations* (New York: UNDP, 2002); *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society* (New York: UNDP, 2003); *Arab Human Development Report 2004: Towards Freedom in the Arab World* (New York: UNDP, 2004); *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries* (New York: UNDP, 2009).

⁴ Mehran Kamrava, 'Multipolarity and Instability in the Middle East', *Orbis* 62:4 (2018).

⁵ Clive Jones, 'The Foreign Policy of Israel', in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (London: Lynne Rienner, 2014).

⁶ Gause, 'The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia', 185.

alongside support for proxies like the Houthis in Yemen, as a major threat;⁷ and at the Arabian peninsula level, where it has tried to impose itself as a hegemonic power.⁸

Saudi pursuit of peninsular hegemony has not been uncontested. In recent decades Qatar has become wealthy through its gas-generated revenues. It has also benefited from having a largely stable and cohesive political elite to guide it, while also being protected by the US; Qatar is host to the American regional military command, CENTCOM. Qatar has also used its wealth to project influence, including through its hosting of the Al Jazeera media network, which reported favourably on the 2011 uprisings.⁹

Qatari activism caused ructions not only with the Saudis, but with the UAE too. For the Emiratis, Qatar's backing of Islamists during the Arab uprisings was beyond the pale.¹⁰ That stance partly contributed towards the Saudi–UAE boycotts of Qatar in 2014 and 2017–21. The UAE's confrontational stance was aided by its own similarly active foreign policy, which like Qatar owed much to the economic opportunities and wealth generated by Abu Dhabi's oil production and Dubai's pursuit of trade, investment and tourism. At the same time, though, Emirati behaviour has tended to be more 'tactical and reactive', rather than part of a previously conceived regional strategy.¹¹

Emirati aversion toward political Islamism has also put it at odds with Turkey and Iran. Along with Qatar, Turkey was a prominent backer of the Muslim Brotherhood after 2011.¹² In part that reflected an earlier internal shift in Turkey's political system, away from a more secular and particularistic Turkish nationalism (Kemalism) towards a more Islamist-oriented one under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) after 2002. At the same time, Turkey's regional status is that of a 'cusp' state and it is therefore exposed to several cross-cutting international challenges and pressures, from Russia to the Arab uprisings to Iran, while being unable either to control or to shape them.¹³

Iran, has faced a similar inability to contain threats to itself and impose its preferences. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Iran's rivalry with the US. For Tehran, the 1979 revolution and the establishment of an Islamic theocracy was part of a longer struggle for independence and freedom from the great powers. For the US, however, the storming of its embassy and the subsequent hostage crisis in 1979–80 damaged any prospect of reasonable relations between the two states and contributed to an ongoing American policy of confrontation and containment.

Instability in Afghanistan and Iraq following US-led interventions did offer space for Iranian activity and cultivation of elites. At the same time, though, the American decline was

⁷ Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).

⁸ F. Gregory Gause III, 'The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia', in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (London: Lynne Rienner, 2014), 185–6.

⁹ Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Mehran Kamrava, 'The Foreign Policy of Qatar', in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (London: Lynne Rienner), 157–8.

¹⁰ Kamrava, *Qatar*.

¹¹ Peter Salisbury, *Risk Perception and Appetite in UAE Foreign and Security Policy* (London: Chatham House, 2020).

¹² Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*, 27.

¹³ Philip Robins, 'The Foreign Policy of Turkey', in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (London: Lynne Rienner, 2014), 334–5.

only relative, and Iran could not completely evade Washington's attention, especially over its nuclear programme. After its public exposure in 2002, Iran was subjected to a regime of tightening sanctions, only briefly alleviated by the nuclear deal between 2015 and 2018. The sanctions also limit Iran's ability to generate revenues from its large oil deposits at market price and blunt its attempts at foreign policy projection.¹⁴

While there is a strong divide between those who align themselves most closely with the US (such as Israel and Saudi Arabia) and those who oppose it, such as Iran, it has not led to the dominance of one side over the other. There are several reasons for this. One is the existence of internal rivalries between these regional powers, perhaps most notably the Saudi/UAE blockade of Qatar. Hostility, such as that between Israel and Turkey, along with lingering suspicion between Israel and some Arab Gulf states (the recent Abraham Accords notwithstanding) may also be relevant. Another is that these regional powers are all relatively evenly matched in terms of material or demographic resources and capacities. While there certainly are disparities in levels of individual per capita wealth, the overall effect is such that none of these regional states is able to contain or subdue the others, either individually or in partnership with each other.¹⁵ A final reason is the nature of their interactions: when they align, they do so usually transactionally.¹⁶ Consequently, their alignments are often shifting, limiting the scope for a formally bound alliance like the recently proposed American initiative for a Middle East Strategic Alliance among its partners.¹⁷

EXTERNAL POWER OBJECTIVES AND REGIONAL POWER RESPONSES

The relative decline of American hegemony, the increasingly multipolar state of the Middle East and the greater competition and assertiveness by and between regional powers has led to a more open environment in which both Western and non-Western outside powers now navigate.

The West: the US and the Europeans

The Western powers entail the US and the Europeans. The two have a long history in the region (Britain and France being imperial powers whose presence became prominent in the nineteenth century; the US coming to prominence after the Second World War) and similar, long-standing objectives for the region. However, those goals have often come into conflict with each other. On one hand, Western powers have supported and promoted democracy in the region. On the other hand, they also want to see order and stability in the region. More often

¹⁴ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 'The Foreign Policy of Iran', in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (London: Lynne Rienner, 2014).

¹⁵ Francesco Cavatorta, 'International Politics of the Middle East', in *The Middle East* (13th edition), ed. Ellen Lust (Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press, 2014).

¹⁶ Guy Burton, 'China's Three-Level Game in the Middle East', *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 15:2 (2021): 189–204.

¹⁷ Yasmine Farouk, 'The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 8 February 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/08/middle-east-strategic-alliance-has-long-way-to-go-pub-78317>.

than not, when obliged to choose between the two, the West has often opted for the latter over the former, contributing to charges of hypocrisy.

For the US, security has meant preventing either an internal hostile power (such as Iran) or an external one (such as the Soviet Union) from dominating the Middle East, undermining the independence of countries like Israel and the oil- and gas-rich Arab Gulf monarchies and using their resources (principally hydrocarbons) as a weapon.¹⁸ American regional partners welcomed that stance, even if they have largely opposed democracy promotion. As a result, regimes introduced partial and half-hearted liberalisation reforms during the high point of Western dominance, in the 1990s.¹⁹ Following the 9/11 attacks, Washington largely abandoned the democracy agenda and concentrated on restoring security by pursuing the extremist Islamist Al Qaeda group in Afghanistan (and removing its patron, the Taliban, from power) and invading Iraq in 2003, ostensibly to disarm it of weapons of mass destruction.

For regional elites and especially those who are Western partners, targeting security threats, especially non-state ones like Al Qaeda, was something they could get behind, even as public sentiment turned against American unilateralism. More recently, however, they have had to contend with successive American administrations expressing their wish to shift attention and resources from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific. Should it happen, the long-established American security umbrella risks being undermined and the region may become less secure. By contrast, for those who oppose American power, such as Iran and the Syrian regime, they have welcomed this and sought to hasten it.

Any American departure would not be covered by the Europeans. As far as the Middle East powers are concerned, their influence has always been secondary to that of the US, and risks becoming even more marginal today. There are several reasons for this. One is that the Europeans lack unity; they constitute a number of different entities, with sometimes contrary objectives. They include the European Union, as well as the more militarily and economically powerful individual states such as Britain, France and Germany, as well as those which have been on the frontline of the refugee and migrant crises of the mid-2010s: Greece, Malta and Italy. The impact on the latter, especially, contributed to a shift in EU and European government behaviour during the decade: in the 1990s and 2000s the EU and European governments focused on measures to boost governance and help build and sustain development and stability in the Mediterranean neighbourhood; in the 2010s Brussels and other European capitals became more reactive and ad hoc as they sought to contain the number and impact of refugees and asylum seekers arriving on European shores.²⁰

¹⁸ Hampton Stephens, 'Questioning the Reasons for U.S. Involvement in the Middle East', *World Politics Review*, 15 April 2019, www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/27262/questioning-the-reasons-for-u-s-involvement-in-the-middle-east; Leslie Tihany, 'Review: American Objectives in the Middle East', *Review of Politics* 46:1 (1984): 155–8.

¹⁹ Barry Rubin, *The Tragedy of the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁰ Ruth Hanau Santini, 'EU Foreign Policy in MENA: The Pitfalls of Depoliticization', in *Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East*, ed. Marc Lynch and Amaney Jamal, Project on Middle East Political Science Studies 34, 2019, http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/POMEPS_Studies_34_Web.pdf; Silvia Colombo and Eduard Soler i Lecha, 'Europe and the "New" Middle East', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23:3 (2021): 403–22; Cavatorta, 'International Politics of the Middle East', 364.

The disparate and reactive character of the Europeans also means they have limited leverage on Middle East states.²¹ Arab Gulf states, for example, have exploited European differences to diversify and increase their armaments, even as European capitals have expressed reservations about the behaviour of the Saudi- and Emirati-led military campaign in Yemen. They have been helped in part by the lack of consistent application and implementation of arms embargoes by European governments.²² European weakness is also evident with supposedly more democratic regional allies and partners, such as Turkey and Israel. Although European states and Turkey share NATO membership, relations have become increasingly fraught, owing to mutual and declining interest and expectation regarding Turkish accession to the EU, President Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian turn and his anger at the muted Western response to the 2016 coup attempt against him. The discovery of gas deposits in the eastern Mediterranean has also exacerbated differences between Turkey and its European neighbours, prompting a 'quasi-alliance' between Israel, Greece and Cyprus against Ankara.²³ Meanwhile, in Israel, European leaders have found themselves ignored as they have appealed for the peace process to restart and a Palestinian state to be established. The Europeans' unwillingness to use their economic leverage as Israel's largest trading partner to force the issue is part of the reason for this; but it may also be due to prioritising concern with both regional security and stability.²⁴

Elsewhere, European weakness has also been evident in its dealings with Iran over its nuclear programme. Like the US, European leaders are wary of Iran and its regional ambitions, but welcomed efforts by Presidents Obama and Biden to reach a deal with Iran, whereby Tehran freezes its nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions being lifted. When President Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018, the Europeans tied to facilitate trade and investment by European firms and prevent them falling foul of sanctions by creating a new mechanism, INSTEX. The move, however, failed to generate the hoped-for levels of exchange and Tehran began to increase its production of nuclear material.²⁵ Meanwhile, the current Iranian government under President Ibrahim Raisi looks set to pursue a 'Second Europe' policy, whereby Tehran looks beyond Brussels and the major European capitals to cultivate ties with other potentially more amenable European states. However, versions of this strategy have been tried on occasion since 1979 and the strategy has so far never succeeded, owing to these states'

²¹ Adel Abdel Ghafer and Silvia Colombo, 'EU–GCC Relations', *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Policy Report* 2, March 2020, <https://www.kas.de/documents/286298/8668222/200401+Policy+Report+No+2+GCC-EU+Path+towards+a+New+Relationship.pdf/25e95278-7689-2ec2-0b14-e27197b49969?version=1.1&t=1585898593194>.

²² Lotje Boswinkel, 'More Arms, Less Influence? Europe–Gulf Relations amid Regional Militarization', *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 12 November 2021, <https://agsiw.org/more-arms-less-influence-europe-gulf-relations-amid-regional-militarization/>.

²³ Emre Erşen and Seçkin Köstem, 'Introduction: Understanding the Dynamics of Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia', in *Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order*, ed. Emre Erşen and Seçkin Köstem (London: Routledge, 2019), 6.

²⁴ Laure Foucher, 'Where Is the EU in the Great Conflicts of the Middle East?' *International Crisis Group*, 20 May 2021, www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/israelpalestine/agenda-exterior-la-ue-y-oriente-proximo.

²⁵ Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, 'The Case for Optimism on Iran in 2022 and Beyond', *Bourse & Bazaar*, 2 January 2022, www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2022/1/2/the-case-for-optimism-on-iran-in-2022-and-beyond.

smaller weight and the prominence of Britain, France and Germany in the negotiations around the nuclear programme and sanctions.²⁶

THE NON-WESTERN POWERS: RUSSIA, CHINA AND INDIA

Unlike the West, there is virtually no tension between regional powers and the political values and ambitions of non-Western powers such as Russia, India and China.²⁷ For all three external powers, non-interference is a key principle in their relations with the Middle East (although adhered to more on rhetorical grounds than in practice in some instances, as was the case with Russia in Syria).

All three non-Western powers opposed the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, none of them dared confront the US directly at the time – a reflection of its then hegemonic status. Ironically, though, that American decision undermined its credibility as it failed to secure both peace and order during the occupation. That, along with the ructions generated by the uprisings after 2011, provided greater space for the three non-Western powers to operate. With the arguable exception of Russia, however, they have done so while not challenging the American-based security architecture in the region, instead focusing on maximising economic exchange and opportunities.²⁸

For China and India, the two largest Asian economies, trade and investment in the Middle East has been concentrated in the Gulf. In part this reflects the growing economic importance of that part of the Middle East, as well as its relative stability after 2011.²⁹ Their efforts have been helped by pre-existing and recent developments, from India's long-established diaspora in the Gulf to China's launch of its Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 to help finance and build infrastructure and local markets across the Eurasian landmass.

The 2011 uprisings caught both by surprise. At first, the protest movements constituted a greater challenge for democratic India than autocratic China, since Indian policy makers were more sensitive to protestors and their demands.³⁰ Despite this difference, however, both powers eventually settled for a policy of non-interference and conflict avoidance which was welcomed by the region's powers and across the divide.

Of the two, China has arguably constituted the more important external power. Economically, it is several degrees of magnitude larger than India and is also the largest trading partner for many in the region. Politically, Chinese non-interference has arguably made its intentions and behaviour open to interpretation. Because of this, it has been portrayed by different actors in the Middle East as an opportunity (in terms of development, economic diversification

²⁶ Mahmoud Javadi, 'Iran's Emerging "Second Europe" Strategy May Be Doomed', *Foreign Policy*, 29 October 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/29/iran-europe-policy-raisi-nuclear-deal-jcpoa/>.

²⁷ Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, *India and the Arab Unrest: Challenges, Dilemmas and Engagement* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022); Cavatorta, 'International Politics of the Middle East', 367.

²⁸ Cavatorta, 'International Politics of the Middle East', 367.

²⁹ David Brewster and Kadir Pethiyagoda, 'India and the Gulf States', in *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies*, ed. Jonathan Fulton and Li-Chen Sim (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); Jonathan Fulton, *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); Guy Burton, *China and Middle East Conflicts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

³⁰ Harsh Pant, *Indian Foreign Policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 175; Brewster and Pethiyagoda, 'India and the Gulf States', 125; Pradhan, *India and the Arab Unrest*, 58.

and reconstruction) and as a threat (through the risk of debt traps and as a challenge to their American partnership).³¹

Chinese opacity is evident in its efforts to keep lines to both sides of the regional divide open and in the way that regional states have sought to interpret the relationship. For instance, Beijing has identified both Saudi Arabia and Iran as key partners; in 2016 it established comprehensive strategic partnerships – the highest form of diplomatic relationship it can offer – with each (in the region only Algeria, Egypt and the UAE have also received this recognition, which also reflects their high share of Chinese regional investment; Israel, meanwhile, has an Innovative Comprehensive Partnership).³² It has also taken modest steps towards mediation in the region, by hosting the final stages of talks between the Saudis and Iranians to restore diplomatic relations in early 2023.³³

For the Arab Gulf states and Israel, engaging with China is one way to counter perceived American lack of interest and its plan to ‘pivot’ to the Indo-Pacific. That position is only possible, though, if the US does not demand that they limit their involvement with Beijing. However, in 2019 the US began to pressure Israel and then the UAE in 2021 over the scope and range of their relationship with China. That has forced the issue for the two regional powers, as they risked offending one or the other global power. In response, Israel set up an advisory committee to review the involvement of foreign firms in areas considered sensitive; that has led to Chinese firms being rejected for tenders. By contrast, the UAE has been more equivocal: it has halted Chinese construction at a port near Abu Dhabi but has also irritated the US by cancelling an order for military aircraft.³⁴

For American rivals such as Iran and Syria, China is less an option and more a necessity. For the two regimes, China is less about diversifying relations and more about shoring up their regimes’ security; China’s status as an aspiring rival superpower to the US means that it provides an alternative in the form of diplomatic protection and economic resources through trade, investment and (for Syria) reconstruction funds which could circumvent Western sanctions. At the same time, the regimes’ invitation for more trade and capital from China must be offset by the relatively modest efforts made by Chinese firms and banks to date. Compared to the very public statements made by Iranian and Syrian officials, Beijing has been far more reticent when it comes to expressing support for the regimes. In short, the relationship between the two regimes and China is one of asymmetry: one in which Damascus and Tehran need Beijing more than Beijing needs them.³⁵

The stakes for regional powers are lower when it comes to India. While India’s smaller economic size may be a factor, so is its more modest geopolitical influence. Whereas Russia

³¹ Jeremy Garlick, *The Impact of China’s Belt and Road Initiative* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

³² American Enterprise Institute, not dated, ‘China Global Investment Tracker’, www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/.

³³ Bernard Orr and Aziz El Yaakoubi, ‘Top Iranian, Saudi Envoys Meet in China in Restoration of Diplomatic Ties’, *Reuters*, 6 April 2023, www.reuters.com/world/foreign-ministers-iran-saudi-meet-china-2023-04-06/.

³⁴ Shira Efron et al, *The Evolving Israel–China Relationship* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2019); Andrew England and Simeon Kerr, ‘UAE Suspends Talks with US over Purchase of F-35 Fighter Jets’, *Financial Times*, 14 December 2021, www.ft.com/content/7ab35684-d536-4908-89d6-a730d844c8d6.

³⁵ Mohammed Al-Sudairi and Andrea Ghiselli, ‘Syria’s “China Dream”: Between the Narratives and Realities’, *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies*, 15 September 2019. www.kfcris.com/en/view/post/234#; Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, *Triple Axis* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).

and China are perceived as alternatives to the US, India's foreign policy is broadly aligned with Washington.³⁶ That has had consequences in the Middle East, with such alignment being relatively stronger with those who are similarly inclined in the Gulf and Israel, and more troublesome with Iran.

Trade and investment between India and the Arab Gulf states has been strongly motivated by rapid economic growth in India and efforts by Arab Gulf states to diversify economically.³⁷ That has led to convergence of interest, which has been formalised in a strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia, a special taskforce with Qatar to direct investment choices and a comprehensive economic partnership with the UAE. The UAE has also indicated interest in investing in the contested Kashmir region.³⁸

India and Israel have similarly seen economic exchange grow. For decades, India's pro-Palestinian stance meant relations between the two were cool. But the establishment of diplomatic relations in the 1990s effectively delinked India-Israeli ties from the Palestinian conflict.³⁹ Since then, a mutually beneficial arms trade has flourished, making India the largest buyer of Israeli military equipment among the BRICS.⁴⁰ More recently, India has shown interest in Israel's hi-tech and security-related sectors: during the first visit by an Indian prime minister to Israel, in 2017, several agreements were signed to advance cooperation in development, agriculture and space.⁴¹

In contrast to the relatively trouble-free ties between India and American regional partners, those with Iran have operated in fits and starts. Particularly troublesome has been India's on-off partnership with Iran to develop the Chabahar port. Despite initial agreement to do so in 2002, the exposure of Iran's nuclear programme and the subsequent sanctions have limited its development. Indian and Iranian hopes for Chabahar have also had to contend with competition from China and Pakistan – India's two greatest rivals – to develop the nearby Pakistani port of Gwadar. If the move is successful, Gwadar, along with the wider China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that would link trade routes between the two countries and Central Asia, would undermine Indian influence.⁴²

³⁶ Frédéric Grare and Jean-Loup Samaan, *The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Pant, *Indian Foreign Policy*.

³⁷ Kabir Taneja, 'How Modi Turned the Gulf to His Favor', *Observer Research Foundation*, 2 July 2019, www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/how-modi-turned-the-gulf-to-his-favor-52652/.

³⁸ Dan Murphy, 'India and UAE Sign Major Investment Pact, Over \$100 Billion in Bilateral Trade', *CNBC*, 18 February 2022, www.cnbc.com/2022/02/18/india-and-uae-sign-major-investment-pact-over-100bn-in-bilateral-trade-.html; Sanjay Kumar, 'Saudi FM's Visit Points to "Growing Strategic Partnership" with India', *Arab News*, 21 September 2021, www.arabnews.com/node/1932306/saudi-arabia; *Economic Times*, 'PM Modi Speaks to Qatar Emir: Task Force to be Set Up to Boost Qatari Investments into India', 8 December 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/pm-modi-speaks-to-qatar-emir-task-force-to-be-set-up-to-boost-qatari-investments-into-india/articleshow/79624572.cms?from=mdr>.

³⁹ P.R. Kumaraswamy, 'The Maturation of Indo-Israeli Ties', *Middle East Quarterly* 20:2 (2013): 39–48.

⁴⁰ Guy Burton, *Rising Powers and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1947* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2018), 125–6.

⁴¹ Herb Keinon, 'Israeli-Indian Statement Ignores Two-State Solution', *Jerusalem Post*, 6 July 2017, www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Modis-Visit/Israeli-Indian-statement-ignores-two-state-solution-498891.

⁴² Sumitha Narayanan Kutty, 'India's Iran Policy: Civilisational Past, Complicated Present', in *Routledge Handbook on South Asian Foreign Policy*, ed. Aparna Pande (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022);

Like Iran, India's relationship with Turkey has also been fraught. Economically, India is Turkey's largest market in South Asia. Politically, however, the relationship has been distant, dating back to the Cold War when Turkey identified with the West and India with the Soviets. After the Cold War, the two tried to reset relations, but it has proved difficult. Erdoğan's intervention on Kashmir in 2019 was perceived to be both on behalf of Muslim rights and in favour of Pakistan's position.⁴³

Political factors have also been important for Russian in the Middle East – perhaps more so than for India and China. But whereas Russian engagement has been more direct than either of the other two, its impact has been more consequential than for India but less so than for China. Direct Russian involvement is most prominent in its intervention on behalf of the regime in the Syrian civil war in 2015. The reasons for Russian intervention were several, and included a desire to prevent unrest spilling into its own national territory in the nearby Caucasus region or among its own Muslim population. President Putin also saw the Middle East as a zero-sum game in which Western advances needed to be blocked. In 2011 the West had backed the Libyan rebels in their successful overthrow of Gaddafi. Putin suspected that the West wanted to do the same in Syria, which, if successful, might undermine Russian influence. Consequently, Putin chose to provide direct support to prevent the regime from collapsing.⁴⁴

Russia's presence in Syria placed it alongside Iran, which was also supporting Damascus, and against Turkey, which backed the opposition. At one level, Putin's gamble paid off, however: Assad's position was secured and Russia gained regional prestige in the process; leaders across the Middle East have all visited Moscow in recent years.⁴⁵ At another level, Putin has had to juggle competing demands by others in the region. In Syria, for example, Moscow is finding itself being played off against Tehran, as the now secure Assad regime dangles the prospect of investment opportunities to help reconstruction towards both.⁴⁶

Russian and Iranian common purpose in Syria masks the fact that the relationship is more a 'suspicious partnership, rather than a strategic alliance'.⁴⁷ The distrust stems from Russian reservations over Iran's nuclear programme as well as Russia's uncertain status in Tehran. Although Russia has backed Iran during negotiations over the nuclear deal, it has limits: like China and the West, Russia does not want Iran to acquire nuclear weapons.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, inside the Iranian regime, opinion is divided regarding Russia's utility. Some, such as former

Harsh Pant and Ketan Mehta, 'India in Chabahar: A Regional Imperative', *Asian Survey* 58:4 (2018): 660–78.

⁴³ P.K. Balachandran, 'Turkiye Seeks Role in South Asian Countries', *NewsIn Asia*, 31 January 2022, <https://newsin.asia/turkiye-seeks-role-in-south-asian-countries/>; Mohammed Solimon, 'An Indo-Abrahamic Alliance on the Rise: How India, Israel, and the UAE Are Creating a New Transregional Order', *Middle East Institute*, 28 July 2021, www.mei.edu/publications/indo-abrahamic-alliance-rise-how-india-israel-and-uae-are-creating-new-transregional.

⁴⁴ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2018), 28–9, 96, 217.

⁴⁵ Mariya Petkova, 'What Has Russia Gained from Five Years of Fighting in Syria?' *Al Jazeera*, 1 October 2020, www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/10/1/what-has-russia-gained-from-five-years-of-fighting-in-syria.

⁴⁶ Sinan Hatahet, *Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria* (London: Chatham House, 2019), www.chathamhouse.org/2019/03/russia-and-iran.

⁴⁷ Esfiandiary and Tabatabai, *Triple Axis*, 36.

⁴⁸ Mark Hibbs, 'Is Iran's Nuclear Future in the Hands of Russia and China?' *Carnegie Europe*, 7 April 2020, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/81484>.

President Rouhani, favoured détente with the West while other, more hardline presidents such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Ibrahim Raisi today saw Russian (and Chinese) partnership as a counterweight to the West.⁴⁹

Competing factors have similarly aided and hindered Russia's relations with other regional powers. Despite Russia and Turkey being on opposite sides in Syria, the two have managed to downplay those differences by channelling them and their interests through the Astana process, a conflict management mechanism which has sought to de-escalate violence and establish spheres of influence across the country.⁵⁰ Similarly, Turkey and Russia find themselves on opposite sides regarding Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, relations have been partially boosted by Erdoğan's more combative demeanor towards the West in recent years and Turkish purchases of Russian military technology. Against this rapprochement, however, is the bigger picture whereby Ankara remains broadly aligned with the West (and against Russia) through common membership of NATO. As Turkey's former NATO representative, Tacan Ildem, has pointed out, the two countries' '[b]ilateral relations have been driven by careful compartmentalisation of strategic interests and divergences. A purposeful culture of engagement has developed [...] where both countries are able to "agree to disagree" on a number of crucial issues.'⁵¹

In the case of Israel, it has not challenged Russia's partnership with Iran and support for the nuclear deal, so long as this does not undermine Israeli security. Israel has also largely ignored Western sanctions against Russian actions in Ukraine. Meanwhile, Putin has overlooked Israeli actions towards the Palestinians and in Gaza, despite Russian support for a two-state solution – much as he has also done regarding Israeli military operations in Syria.⁵²

As for the Arab Gulf states, Russian relations have ranged from relatively good with the UAE to more problematic with the Saudis.⁵³ For Russia–UAE relations there is convergence, including their mutual opposition towards terrorism, the UAE's more pragmatic stance towards Iran owing to the high volume of trade between them and, given the Emirati presence in Libya, Russia's potential mediating influence. For Russian–Saudi relations, there are several points of divergence. They include differences over how best to manage Iran, Russian frustration at previous Saudi backing for Islamists in the Caucasus and the most appropriate levels of oil production to maximise prices.⁵⁴ Despite these tensions, however, American retrenchment and a growing Russian presence has been sufficient to prompt both the Saudis and the UAE

⁴⁹ Alex Vatanka, 'A New Chapter for Iran and Russia', *Foreign Policy*, 21 January 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/21/iran-russia-relations-raisi-putin/>.

⁵⁰ Erşen and Köstem, 'Introduction: Understanding the Dynamics of Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia', 5.

⁵¹ Tacan Ildem, 'A Balancing Act: Turkey's Misunderstood Position on Ukraine', European Leadership Network, 22 November 2022, www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/a-balancing-act-turkeys-misunderstood-position-on-ukraine/.

⁵² Nikolay Kozhanov, 'Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: New Challenges for Western Interests', in *The Russia File*, ed. Stefan Meister and Daniel Hamilton (Berlin: German Council on Foreign Relations, 2017), 117; Zvi Magen, 'Israel and Russia', in *Israel under Netanyahu: Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy*, ed. Robert Freedman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020). Daniel Rakov, 'The Netanyahu Government's Approach to Russia and Ukraine', Washington Institute, 28 February 2023, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/netanyahu-governments-approach-russia-and-ukraine.

⁵³ Li-Chen Sim, 'Russia's Return to the Gulf', in *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies*, ed. Jonathan Fulton and Li-Chen Sim (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

to sign Declarations of Strategic Partnership with Russia in 2018.⁵⁵ More recently, while Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 may have diminished its military stature, it has not discouraged Arab Gulf states from maintaining ties with Moscow – even as they have come under American pressure to do so. An important reason for this is the increasingly transactional and pragmatic approach to diplomacy being adopted by Riyadh and others in the Gulf, along with a sense that the war is a primarily European one.⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

The Middle East is currently in a state of transition and uncertainty. For more than a decade, states and societies across the region have been buffeted by pressures from within and without. Those within include the populations' frustrations with the unrepresentative nature of the regimes that rule over them and their inability to provide them with security, good-quality public services and meaningful economic opportunities. Meanwhile, at the international level, American hegemony is being questioned, opening up space for both regional powers and other, external ones to operate. Yet even as the US declines, it still remains *primus inter pares*, as illustrated by the enduring division between those regional powers such as the Arab Gulf states and Israel who align with it and its rivals, such as Iran (as well as Syria and various non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas).

Notwithstanding the regional divide and alignments, another important feature of today's Middle East is the highly autonomous behaviour of today's regional powers. They pursue policies to maximise what they see as in their national (or, more accurately, their regime's) security interests. They have exploited the fractured state of the region, intervening in conflicts and backing proxies to advance their goals. At the same time, they have looked at the various external actors present in the region and cultivated them, regardless of their ideological orientations and whether they are long-established partners or rivals. This approach may best be summarised by the term 'hedging'. In international relations, hedging is understood as ambiguous behaviour by a state in a context of international uncertainty.⁵⁷ The uncertainty is the result of the system being one where power is diffuse and not concentrated – a common feature of multipolar systems, and one where the cost of hedging behaviour is lower as a result.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Mark Katz, 'Riyadh and Abu Dhabi Draw Closer to Moscow', *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 20 June 2018, <https://agsiw.org/riyadh-abu-dhabi-draw-closer-moscow/>; Amir Asmar, 'Why Would Arab Leaders Pursue Strategic Partnerships with Russia?' *Council for Foreign Relations*, 5 November 2019, www.cfr.org/blog/why-would-arab-leaders-pursue-strategic-partnerships-russia.

⁵⁶ Giorgio Cafiero, 'Analysis: The Russia–Ukraine War and the View from Saudi Arabia', *Al Jazeera*, 24 October 2022, www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/24/analysis-russia-ukraine-war-view-from-saudi-arabia; Pinar Tank, Júlia Palik, Jørgen Jensehaugen and Kristian Berg Harpviken, 'Transactional Engagements: Middle East Responses to the Ukrainian War', PRIO Blogs, 24 March 2022, <https://blogs.prio.org/2022/03/transactional-engagements-middle-eastern-responses-to-the-ukrainian-war/>.

⁵⁷ Cheng-Chwee Kuik and Gilbert Rozman, 'Light or Heavy Hedging: Positioning between China and the US', in *Joint U.S.–Korea Academic Studies 2015*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, 1–9 (Washington DC: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2015). www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/introduction_-_light_or_heavy_hedging.pdf.

⁵⁸ Kei Koga, 'The Concept of "Hedging" Revisited: The Case of Japan's Foreign Policy Strategy in East Asia's Power Shift', *International Studies Review* 20:4 (2018): 633–60.

The decision by regional (and external) powers to hedge in the Middle East remains the same, regardless of which side of the American alignment/non-alignment fence they sit on. For allies and partners such as Israel and the Arab Gulf states, it does not mean an abandonment of Washington as their primary partner, but rather an insurance policy should Washington make good on its decision to shift attention and resources to the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, that prospect may have even helped bring some regional powers closer to each other, such as in the case of Israel and the UAE and Bahrain through the so-called Abraham Accords in 2020. Meanwhile, for US rivals such as Iran and more problematic partners such as Turkey, it means diversifying the number of other potential supporters who can counter American influence or downgrading its tensions with others (such as Iran and Saudi Arabia).

Because the US decline is relative rather than absolute, its preponderance has also had consequences on external power actions and regional power responses. The Europeans remain a secondary Western influence to Washington. Among non-Western powers, neither China, with its economic weight, nor Russia, with its more direct involvement in Syria, look like replacing the US. Yet regardless of this, regional states have continued to engage these powers as they try to improve their prospects, whether strategic or economic.

Looking ahead, it is likely that the current state of affairs will continue. Contrary to some of the expectations of regional regimes who backed counterrevolutionary measures from the mid-2010s, the Middle East remains in a state of flux; the protests in Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon from the last part of that decade arguably point to the ongoing nature of the uprisings and their causes, which may last a generation should the region's regimes not respond to them sufficiently. If that is the case it presents both opportunities and challenges for regional powers as they seek to take advantage of them – or risk being left behind by others who do. As they do so, they will not only look within these countries and societies to cultivate proxies and allies, but also appeal to partners from outside the region in their efforts to do so.

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13. US foreign policy toward the Middle East

Mahmood Monshipouri and Manochehr Dorraj

INTRODUCTION

After World War II, the United States began to identify broad national interests in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and developed strategic plans for maintaining a significant military presence in the region. While access to oil primarily drew the United States to the Middle East, it was the gradual British withdrawal, initially from Palestine but subsequently from the Persian Gulf, that prompted Washington to seek to fill that power vacuum. During the second half of the twentieth century, US foreign policy toward the Middle East revolved around safeguarding the oil flow from the region, supporting Israel and the region's pro-Western governments, and containing the spread of communism in the region. These policies were subsequently expanded to include other strategic objectives such as combating terrorism, promoting peace between the Palestinians and Israelis, and preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction. To achieve these goals, the United States resorted to wide-ranging activities including the use of military force, military intervention, covert operations, foreign aid, arms sales, and diplomacy.

During the Cold War (1947–90), military intervention became a key flashpoint for Washington's attempt to carve a sphere of influence. The 1979 Iranian Revolution, which led to the fall of the Shah's pro-West regime in Iran, presented Washington with new and evolving challenges. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990) provided yet another opportunity for the United States to exploit the region's already volatile political situation. The end of the Cold War was followed by the 9/11 attacks on the United States, provoking US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—wars of choice that proved prohibitively costly and wearisome, sapping US energy and resources and diminishing its political capital. In the meantime, the attention usually paid to the traditional trio of American interests—that is, Washington's concern about the Soviet expansion of influence, access to oil, and support for Israel—shifted to a far more complex project of creating a “new security structure” in the region, transforming Middle Eastern societies from authoritarian regimes into “functioning democracies” and open markets. The catalyst for this shift in foreign policy was the 9/11 attacks on the United States. The rise of “neoconservatives” in the administration of George W. Bush shifted policy away from traditional diplomacy and toward a drastically different agenda for the region. The result was a new and growing emphasis on the “war on terror,” “regime change,” and preemptive military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.¹

With the election of Barack Obama, US–Middle East relations returned to traditional diplomacy and multilateralism. Direct military interventions lost favor in Washington, while the use of drones to target highly sought-after terrorist targets increased. With the US depend-

¹ Michael Hudson, “The United States in the Middle East,” in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 301.

ency on Middle Eastern oil drastically declining, thanks in part to the “shale revolution” that transformed the US from a net importer to an exporter of oil and natural gas, and with the American people growing further war-weary following the catastrophic consequences of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, US foreign policy underwent a major transformation. Moreover, the resurgence of China and Russia on the global scene dictated significant changes in US foreign policy. While the United States remained committed to the all-too-familiar goals of supporting Israel, combating terrorism, and preventing “the spread of weapons of mass destruction,” it decided to reduce its military presence in the region. The Trump administration echoed Obama’s sentiment about reducing US military footprint and intervention in the MENA region, albeit using different rhetoric and tactics; in this case it was intended to shift the balance of power in favor of the conservative pro-US Arab regimes of the Persian Gulf and Israel, while isolating Iran and punishing it with further sanctions and attempted economic strangulation. The Trump administration’s decisions to move the US embassy to Jerusalem and cut US financial aid to the Palestinian Authority, and its assertive mediation to bring to fruition the “Abraham Accords” between Israel, UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, all exemplified this more muscular foreign policy approach.

Clearly, the invasion of Iraq resulted in further political instability in a region disillusioned with US military occupation and ripe for sectarian strife and religious extremism. The war in Iraq, followed by the emergence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which at one point controlled a third of Iraq,² further confounded the US mission there. The ensuing 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, combined with the increasing cost of US military intervention in the region—both in blood and treasure—signified a dramatic shift in Washington’s policies toward the region. The growing Iran–Saudi rivalry in the aftermath of civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen convinced Washington that the so-called awakened sectarian impulses resulting from this rivalry were likely to heighten the level of insecurity throughout the region, militarizing both regimes and furthering their estrangement from each other.

The argument at the core of this chapter centers on the way in which the gradual US withdrawal from the region has driven both Saudi Arabia and Iran to engage in secret talks, reducing their intense rivalry in places such as Yemen and Syria, but most notably in the Persian Gulf region. Pursuing this diplomatic course between the two key actors, if not derailed by events, could be potentially impactful, paving the way for the emergence of a new security architecture in the region.

In the sections that follow, this chapter examines the evolution of US foreign policy toward the Middle East by examining the changing role of the United States in the post-Cold War era. It considers the 9/11 attacks on the United States and their chaotic aftermath. The impact of the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, which led to long and painful occupations of those countries, is examined closely. We then turn our attention to the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and their secret negotiations, on the other, while examining their implications for the possible emergence of a new security structure in the region. Finally, we discuss the role of new actors in the region in the wake of the piecemeal US withdrawal from the Middle East.

² Jane Arraf, “After Years as Battleground, Post-ISIS Investment Boom Lifts Iraqi City,” *The New York Times*, 11 July 2021.

THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

The post-Cold War era triggered new challenges and contradictions for US foreign policy toward the Middle East. In Afghanistan, the secular state-building project was abandoned following the Soviet withdrawal in 1988. Still in the Cold War mindset, the United States remained focused on confronting and deterring communism. With the active encouragement of the CIA and Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), the *mujahideen* played a significant role in dislodging Soviet forces from Afghanistan throughout the 1980s. The Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan by the mid-1990s was made possible in part by Pakistan's ISI, which in turn was influenced by CIA recommendations. The actions of the Taliban at that time largely served US geopolitical interests.³ In fact, throughout the 1990s, the United States had no reconstruction plan for post-Soviet Afghanistan. As a result, in the aftermath of the civil war, the chaos and poverty that prevailed throughout the country provided fertile ground for the Taliban's ascendance to power.

The unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict continued to further complicate US foreign policy in the region in this era. The United States continued to support both Israel and the region's corrupt and dysfunctional regimes, further alienating reformist social movements, and discrediting its foreign policy in the region. Rolling back Iraq's invasion of Kuwait opened an opportunity to unleash a series of negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians under the Oslo Accords. The United States found itself amid yet another paradox: brokering a truce while maintaining a partisan diplomatic stance of unconditional support for Israel. The collapse of the peace process and the continuing plight of the Palestinians under occupation pointed to a contradictory US diplomacy that made unrealistic any prospects for successful mediation in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Because of America's reliance on the region's oil, and the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) lucrative market for its armaments and defense industries, there was arguably an incentive for the United States to help in the resolution of the dispute. But other economic and geopolitical interests often overshadowed this incentive. With the United States playing the dual role of main mediator of the conflict and chief diplomatic, financial, and military supporter of Israeli occupation forces, US policy was mired in a critical paradox.⁴

9/11 AND THE RISE OF NEOCONSERVATIVES

While in the Cold War mindset the US focus was on confronting and deterring Communism, in the post-9/11 era that fixation was subsequently replaced with "the Islamic threat." In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, US domestic law enforcement's scrutiny of Muslims raised the concern that the war against terrorism would be seen as a war against Muslims.⁵ US foreign policymakers warned against such proverbial fault lines, as they

³ Michel Chossudovsky, "Who Is Osama Bin Laden?" *Global Dialogue* 3:4 (2001), 5.

⁴ Stephen Zunes, "Ten Things You Should Know about U.S. Policy in the Middle East," *AlterNet*, 26 September 2001, www.zmag.org.

⁵ Augustus Richard Norton, "America's Approach to the Middle East: Legacies, Questions, and Possibilities," *Current History* (January 2002), 4.

shifted their focus to the threats posed by radical Islamic movements such as the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS.

The September 11 tragedy revealed the political side effects of a flawed foreign policy that was desperately in need of restructuring. In the absence of a transparent strategy, the US government's war on terror appeared to be devised as a legitimization for military adventures wherever or whenever the Bush administration deemed appropriate. In the area of investigation and prosecution, the federal government engaged in widespread practices that ran counter to the liberal democratic values underlying the American political and judicial processes. Such acts clearly were in violation of the civil rights and freedoms of non-citizens. These included, among others, extended detention and interrogation, adopting expanded surveillance powers and tools, instituting financial strictures and rewards, altering the judicial system, and requiring greater information sharing between agencies.⁶

The extended detention and questioning interrupted the due process of law, as many suspects were held incommunicado. Additionally, a Bureau of Prisoners (BOP) regulation authorized the BOP and the Department of Justice (DOJ) to monitor communications between suspects and their attorneys. The application of this practice in certain cases amounted to harassment of an ethnic minority. By January 2002, of the more than 1,200 individuals detained on suspicion of terrorism, only a few were considered material witnesses, with others held on minor immigration violations. This amounted to a clear violation of equal protection before the law and critics of the Bush administration regarded it as discriminatory practice based on religion and ethnicity.⁷

Thus, the presidency of George W. Bush (2001–8) came to be defined by the so-called war on terror after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, launched by an Afghanistan-based terrorist organization called Al-Qaeda. These attacks claimed the lives of nearly 3,000 people on US soil, giving President Bush the benefit of the doubt—if not *carte blanche*—in waging a war against terrorist organizations and networks overseas. In October 2001 the United States attacked Afghanistan to topple the Taliban regime there, which had given sanctuary to Al-Qaeda. Bush's expansion of the "war on terror" to Iraq in March 2003—under the dubious assumption that Iraq was behind the 9/11 attacks and had weapons of mass destruction that were an immediate threat to the US—became a costly and unpopular war with many negative regional and global consequences. While one of the Bush administration's publicly stated reasons for invasion of Iraq was to bring "a Jeffersonian democracy" to Iraq and to promote democracy in the region, its continued support for pro-US authoritarian regimes revealed the stark gaps between rhetoric and reality.

The most glaring example of this contradiction between the rhetoric and the deeds of the US is manifested in its foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia, which is by far its closest Arab ally in the region, yet has one of the poorest human rights records in the Middle East. Considerations of human rights and democratic principles are clearly subordinated to US interests of strategic, military, and commercial ties with the Saudi government. Countries that fell outside this "friendly" orbit, such as Libya, Iraq, and Iran, were punished by economic sanctions and the

⁶ Laura K. Donohue, "Fear Itself: Counterterrorism, Individual Rights, and U.S. Foreign Relations Post 9-11," in *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Understanding the New Security Environment, Readings and Interpretations*, eds Russell D. Howard and Reid L. Sawyer (Guilford: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2002), 3019.

⁷ Donohue, "Fear Itself," 323.

threat of war. A close examination of US foreign policy toward the region since 1991 reveals that given the choice between embracing the democratic aspirations of the people in the region or supporting the authoritarian states it regards as allies, US government has always embraced the latter. Thus, the US concern for “security” has always trumped its rhetoric in support of democracy and human rights.

Promoting democratic principles could, in some cases, lead to Islamic opposition groups’ rise to power. Some of these groups are not sympathetic to the US presence and interests in the region. Support for reform-minded groups, Islamic or otherwise, is likely to better accommodate some of the US interests in the region in the long run. The democracy conundrum notwithstanding, the United States’ continued backing of the region’s corrupt, repressive, and dysfunctional regimes has alienated reformist social movements, further discrediting US foreign policy in the region.

Purportedly, Bush saw the toppling of Saddam Hussein as the first step in the spread of democracy in the Middle East. A network of neoconservative “hawks,” backed by the right-wing Israeli lobby, seized upon the 9/11 attacks to impose its interventionist agenda. A domestic “triple entente” of neoconservatives, the Israeli lobby, and Christian Evangelicals ensured that Israel’s regional hegemony would be maintained and its policies would not be seriously challenged by Washington, no matter what political party should win the presidential race. The pursuit of this goal predated the H.W. Bush administration: in 1997 neoconservatives created the Project for the New American Century, an organization that frequently called for the removal from power of Saddam Hussein and his regime.⁸

While Bush talked democracy regarding Iraq and Afghanistan, he continued to support repressive, undemocratic regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and North Africa. The credibility of his democracy campaign was short-lived. By 2006, with Iraq plunging into civil war, Hamas winning elections in the Gaza Strip, and Hezbollah gaining immense popularity following its summer war with Israel, Bush’s democracy campaign was totally discredited.

The military intervention in Afghanistan raised the specter of a so-called unilateral moment in US foreign policy. President George W. Bush’s State of the Union address, which lumped together Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an “axis of evil,” undermined the progress made both in stabilizing Afghanistan and in enhancing the democratic movement in Iran. Iran played a constructive role in the defeat of the Taliban by supporting the Northern Alliance—as did the United States—and by nudging along the government headed by Hamid Karzai. In fact, Iran became the leading developing nation, among the donors from the Global South, contributing financially to the reconstruction of Afghan economy and society.

Toward the end of his second term, Bush turned his attention to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict by underlining his vision of two states—Israel and Palestine—living side by side in peace and security. This vision came to be known as the “road map,” a proposal that was based on the idea that incremental changes would bring Palestinians and Israelis to the point where they can negotiate several divisive issues. This process encountered formidable obstacles from the start because, as predicted, each incremental gesture aggravated—rather than alleviated—the problems having to do with the resolution of longstanding problems such as the border issue, refugees’ right of return, and Jerusalem.

⁸ Hudson, “The United States in the Middle East,” 299–302.

The killing of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011 reinforced the notion that the so-called war on terror can be won. Yet, closing this chapter on terrorism raised a myriad of questions about the most effective ways to deal with looming problems ahead. The most daunting task facing the Obama administration was to avoid any rupture in relations with key regional allies that could endanger the counterterrorism network that it has so painstakingly constructed in Pakistan. Similarly, the killing of bin Laden was a major setback for Al-Qaeda. This transnational, decentralized, and ideological terrorist network, however, was likely to continue to strike Western targets in the future. While bin Laden and his terror network provided the much-needed alibi for the Bush administration to launch its costly and counterproductive military incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq—wars from which Al-Qaeda and its leaders benefited immensely by recruiting their foot soldiers—his demise opened a new dialogue about the way forward. The ensuing Arab revolts in North Africa and the Middle East undermined Al-Qaeda's narrative of violent change. To restore their sense of lost dignity, the vast majority of the people in the Middle East chose the counter-narrative of peaceful democratic change, as evidenced by the 2011 Arab uprisings.

THE 2011 “ARAB SPRING” UPRISINGS

The revolts in the Arab world, triggered by the self-immolation of Tunisian vegetable peddler Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010, swept across the region, toppling authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, followed by civil wars in Syria and Bahrain. The massive street protests and contagion also posed a threat to conservative regimes in the Persian Gulf, whose rulers were reluctant to grant political concessions to citizens and residents alike. Under mounting pressure, the leaders of these countries increased public spending in order to placate their citizens and buy their loyalty.⁹

The wave of protests in the MENA region also revealed that US foreign policy had eventually come home to roost. The Mubarak regime, supported by the United States since 1981, was overthrown when it became abundantly clear that it no longer represented the aspirations of the Egyptian people. Mubarak was seen as an autocrat who perpetuated the interests of a corrupt regime and a ruler who owed his power to external support and foreign assistance, largely from the United States (\$1.3 billion annually). At that time nearly 20 percent of Egyptians lived below the national poverty line, according to the World Bank, and about 44 percent of the population lived on \$2 per day or less.¹⁰ Moreover, the corrosive impact of economic inequality has led to the emergence of an affluent class in predominantly lower middle-class and poor cities such as Cairo and Alexandria. Since 1991, under IMF and World Bank guidance, Egypt has adopted a myriad of neoliberal policies, constantly experiencing workers strikes and demonstrations.¹¹

⁹ Richard W. Mansbach and Kirsten L. Taylor, *Challenges for America in the Middle East* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2017), 82.

¹⁰ Barbara Kotschwar et al, *Reengaging Egypt: Options for U.S.-Egypt Economic Relations* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009), 41.

¹¹ Mahmood Monshipouri and Ali Assareh, “The New Middle East and the United States: What to Expect after the Uprisings?” *Insight Turkey* 13:3 (July 2011).

As the Obama administration searched for new ways to reconcile US values and interests across the region, it felt compelled to make difficult but necessary trade-offs. By refusing to play an active role in Libya, the Obama administration sent a signal to its allies that it was hesitant to insert itself into NATO's involvement in that country's civil war, arguing that it sought to prevent a humanitarian crisis there. While the United States initially supported these uprisings, subsequently it sided with the counter-revolution in Egypt and supported el-Sisi's coup that restored the military dictatorship (2013); it also lent its support to efforts to restore the status quo in the rest of the region, alienating the protesters and dashing their dreams of political accountability, the rule of law, and democratic governance.

Few problems were more daunting than curbing the grinding and brutal civil war in Syria. This war gave rise to the emergence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS or ISIL, also known as Islamic State and Daesh), which at one point controlled large swaths of Iraq and Syria, while also cultivating new allies in Afghanistan, Libya, and Yemen. The sustained intensity of the fighting between the Syrian government, rebel groups, and ISIS left two-thirds of the Syrian people in dire need of humanitarian aid, with nearly 8 million displaced in Syria itself and throughout the international community.¹² This three-way conflict cast the United States and Russia as both competitors in one war and nominal allies in the other, with both fighting the forces of extremism.

The civilian displacement and flight from Syria resulted in an unprecedented refugee crisis; as the waves of asylum seekers aiming to reach Europe expanded, the European Union (EU) attempted to find a collective answer. Europe's new challenge was whether the dramatic increase in asylum seekers and refugees was the beginning of a new era of migration or just a temporary adjustment to its immigration turmoil. One of the consequences of the Syrian civil war was further politicization of the military, the only remaining functioning institution in a country in which a minority population of Alawites ruled over the majority Sunnis.¹³

Fighting against ISIS and the Assad regime also required serious and steady commitment, for which none of the key regional players such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, all of whom have long supported anti-Assad forces, appeared prepared or found themselves capable of managing. The persistence of the moral problem at the core of this crisis, along with the lack of political will and determination on the part of the aforementioned regional actors, presented an overwhelming challenge, defying simple and coherent political direction.

Adding another layer of uncertainty to these challenges was the emergence of a new strategic shift from an interventionist to inward-looking approach in US foreign policy toward the Middle East. In the immediate aftermath of the uprisings in Syria, the United States tried to negotiate Assad out of the country. Subsequently, however, when it became obvious that Assad was unlikely to leave in the near future and that there was no appetite among the US public for yet another military intervention, the Obama administration sought to stop the spread of violence in the region.

The gradual disentanglement of the US public from both the "war on terror" campaign and the military interventions and endless wars in the Middle East—while the state still maintained

¹² Kareem Fahim and Maher Samaan, "Violence in Syria Spurs Huge Spike in Civilian Flight," *The New York Times*, 27 October 2015.

¹³ Philippe Droz-Vincent, "The Military amidst Uprisings and Transitions in the Arab World," in *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, ed. Fawaz A. Gerges (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

a great deal of control over the sea lanes and skies—indicated the emergence of a new regional order, and one that would likely plunge Iraq into a prolonged sectarian conflict. The declining US military presence in the region has thus far fueled a new era of insecurity and anxiety in which failed policies have provided an excuse for both ruling elites and sectarian leaders to exploit religious tensions to mobilize followers.¹⁴ Some experts have made a case for bringing the United States back into the Middle East through a progressive platform of economic reform. Absent reform, they argue that there will always be more revolutions, failed states, civil wars, insurgencies, and terrorism.¹⁵

Upon his ascendance to the presidency—unlike many of his predecessors, whose first foreign policy trips were often either to Mexico, Canada, or Europe—President Trump’s first foreign policy trip was to Saudi Arabia and Israel, where he affirmed his administration’s firm support for both governments and made several anti-Iranian public statements. This was followed by the abrogation of the 2015 nuclear deal signed by the Obama administration, and the imposition of new draconian sanctions dubbed “Maximum Pressure” in 2018, despite the Iranian government abiding by its obligations under the deal. This acrimonious policy was intended to usher in economic strangulation, implosion, and regime change in Iran.

To continue the assault on any possibility of normalization of relations with Iran under a future US administration, in January 2020 Trump ordered the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, arguably the second most powerful man in the Islamic Republic, which in turn enticed Iranian missile attacks against US military bases in Iraq, thus further escalating the tensions between the two nations. When this policy was followed by a huge arms sale (\$110 billion) to Saudi Arabia¹⁶ and the whitewashing of Muhammad Bin Salman’s role in the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, it became abundantly clear that Obama’s attempts to balance US foreign policy toward Iran and Saudi Arabia, manifested in his exhortation that “Iran and Saudi Arabia should share the region,” were long gone.¹⁷ While Trump’s anti-Iranian gambit further fueled the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the roots of such competition and strained ties between the two countries can be traced back, among other things, to the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings.

THE RIYADH–TEHRAN RIVALRY AND CONFLICT

In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, Saudi support for the 2013 coup in Egypt, which brought General el-Sisi to power, was a clear indication of Riyadh’s support for anti-revolutionary and anti-reform forces in the Arab world. Following these uprisings the Shiite–Sunni rivalry escalated, turning into a crucial power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran’s support for its proxy forces in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen was broadly viewed by Saudis as a threat to their political stability. The Saudis in turn resorted to fueling sectarian

¹⁴ Kareem Fahim, “Sectarian Leaders Fan Flames in Middle East,” *The New York Times*, 18 October 2015.

¹⁵ Shadi Hamid and Peter Mandaville, “Bringing the United States Back into the Middle East,” *The Washington Quarterly* 36:4 (Fall 2013), 104.

¹⁶ Javier E. David, “US–Saudi Arabia Seal Weapons Deal Worth Nearly \$110 Billion Immediately, \$350 Billion over 10 Years,” *CNBC.COM*, 20 May 2017.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, 7 April 2016.

tensions in the region to counterbalance Iran's growing influence. The Trump administration's attempt to forge an anti-Iranian alliance among Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) further intensified this regional rivalry.

Saudi Arabia's catastrophic military engagement in Yemen spilled over into Lebanon, where the young Saudi prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) seemed fixated on fostering an Israeli invasion of Lebanon to eradicate Hezbollah's influence in that country and the region more generally. It is safe to assume that this troubling situation was a direct consequence of the encouragement that the Trump administration had given the Saudis. Given this reality, a key question persists: Did Washington's downsizing signal a US return to an off-shore balancing strategy, in which the United States provides the necessary military wherewithal to its allies in the region to counter Iran?

The sudden abdication of the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who had become a pawn in Saudi efforts to isolate their regional rival Iran and its ally Hezbollah, illustrated one way in which Riyadh intended to undercut Iranian influence in the region.¹⁸ Hariri's resignation, under pressure from Riyadh, was also a direct result of the Saudis being given the go-ahead to recalibrate the power structure of the Middle East. This development demonstrated a partnership of sorts among Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States, attempting to change the regional balance of power to the detriment of Tehran and roll back its increasing influence in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Yet this partnership contained its own limits and perils. It is by no means clear that a new war between Israel and Hezbollah would serve the region's order and stability. Any attacks against Hezbollah would likely germinate into a wider confrontation, involving Iran. It is unlikely that Washington's ongoing strategic interests in the Middle East (stability in Iraq and Afghanistan, defeating ISIS and radical Islamic movements, stable oil prices and markets) will be better served as a result.

How did the crisis and rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia reach this critical point? The rise to power of the young and audacious Prince Mohammed bin Salman introduced a new element into the way the Saudis strategize about meeting the challenges of domestic and regional politics. The Saudis regarded Syria as a battleground for their rivalry with Iran. While opposing the Assad regime in Syria, Saudis sought to balance the influence of Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah. They were also dismayed by Washington's reluctance to use force against Assad after his alleged use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs against civilians. But perhaps the Saudis' real concern related to the US willingness to negotiate with Iran regarding Tehran's nuclear program and the possibility of rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.¹⁹

Washington regarded the concern of Saudis as gratuitous at best and fundamentally flawed at worst. Increasingly, US experts have suggested that the economic sanctions and isolation of Iran—at times, hawks in Washington have also hinted at regime change—have a poor record when it comes to yielding the desired goal of changing Iran's foreign policy conduct. As the Bush administration wrestled with the damage done by the Iraq War, some of its senior advis-

¹⁸ Anne Barnard, "A Missing Prime Minister Is the Antihero of Beirut's Marathon," *The New York Times*, 14 November 2017.

¹⁹ Mansbach and Taylor, *Challenges for America in the Middle East*, 256.

ers began to recognize that its obdurate insistence on not engaging directly in P5+1 diplomacy with Iran had become futile.²⁰

Along the same lines, other observers have also pointed out that despite the fact that the 2015 Iran nuclear deal was an imperfect arrangement that did little to change the Iranian government's support for its proxy forces as well as its regional activities, this deal would not—and was not designed to—address all the disputes between the United States and Iran. It did, however, block the path for Iran to develop a nuclear weapon while simultaneously reducing the risk of yet another war in the Middle East. Crucially, according to UN watchdogs, Iran upheld its end of the agreement. The nuclear deal put in place mechanisms to curtail the nuclear proliferation risk, avoided the costs and consequences of military intervention, and heightened the possibility of resolving other regional differences through international cooperation and diplomatic agreement.²¹

It is also equally important to realize that the rapidly increasing shale oil and gas production in the United States pushed prices down globally prior to 2021, while also dramatically reducing US dependency on oil from the MENA region. “Fracking” in North Dakota, Texas, Pennsylvania, and other places, as some experts have noted, had already increased US oil and gas production by 10 and 14 percent respectively by the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, as the United States overtook Russian oil and gas production.²² Shifts in global demand for energy, along with a substantial increase in US oil and gas production, are likely to affect US relations with the Persian Gulf states in many different ways.²³

At the same time, Saudi involvement—both directly and indirectly—in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon has thus far failed to pay political dividends. Furthermore, it appears now that MBS is seeking to shift attention away from his domestic troubles and challenges (reform, purges, young demographics, unemployment, declining oil revenue, the COVID-19 pandemic) by championing a more nationalistic and aggressive foreign policy, hoping that such approach would help to consolidate his power at home.

Following the Trump administration's imposition of further sanctions on Iran's energy exports, Tehran announced that if it cannot export its oil—that is, its core economic lifeline—it would disrupt the flow of oil and gas from the region to other parts of the world. This threat materialized when Iranian drones struck the state-owned Saudi Aramco oil processing facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais in eastern Saudi Arabia. MBS thought that by lobbying the Trump administration to opt for a more antagonistic foreign policy toward Iran, it would strengthen his position in the region. What he underestimated was the ability of the Iranian government to retaliate and make the Saudis' confrontational stance both economically and politically costly for the royal family.

Becoming convinced that escalation of sectarian conflict is a lose-lose proposition, both sides concluded that if the post-American Middle East is to see a semblance of peace and stability, exploring the channels of diplomacy and confidence-building measures is more likely to

²⁰ William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (New York: Random House, 2020), 340.

²¹ Philip H. Gordon, *Losing the Long Game: The False Promise of Regime Change in the Middle East* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020), 275; Diane Randall, “War or Peace? For Iran and the United States, It's Time to Decide,” *The Washington Post*, 19 July 2021.

²² Mansbach and Taylor, *Challenges for America in the Middle East*, 257.

²³ Mansbach and Taylor, *Challenges for America in the Middle East*, 257.

usher in a mutually beneficial outcome. Starting in January 2021, officials of the two governments held secret meetings to negotiate a possible resolution of their conflict, in part catalyzed by the specter of diminishing US presence in the region, and in part due to the surging threat of regional political instability.²⁴ The willingness of the US to shift its focus away from the Middle East has spawned regional diplomacy among the key actors in the region. Whether or not such negotiations will have tangible political dividends remains to be seen, but the fact remains that both Saudis and Iranians feel compelled to seek regional solutions absent Washington's heavy military presence in the region.²⁵

The history of Saudi–Iranian relations in the past 40-plus years reveals that there are sporadic periods of thawing and improvement in the political relations between the two countries, punctuated by some increased diplomacy and cooperation, followed by an eruption of further conflict and confrontation.²⁶ Therefore, the current diplomatic overtures should be seen not as a stepping stone to complete normalization and an end to the rivalries and hostilities, but rather as another episode in the ongoing history of conflict and cooperation between the two nations. For the immediate future, much depends on the outcome of the war in Yemen as well as Saudi rapprochement with the Assad regime.

Another regional context in which Riyadh's new tone toward Tehran is unfolding is the de-escalation of its conflict with Qatar and Turkey. There is a realization on the part of the Saudi leadership that as the United States seeks to decrease its military footprint and its commitments in the region, regional powers are likely to assume a larger role in shaping political outcomes. Absent the unconditional US support for the Saudis found under the Trump administration, the Saudis have decided to come to terms with other regional powers.²⁷ As noted above, another relevant factor determining Saudis' new approach toward the region is related to their dismal failures in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Libya.

AN EVOLVING GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC)

The lack of common interests among the GCC member states is often reflected in their competing and at times conflicting foreign policy orientations. Despite the rapprochement and the attempt to mend fences between Qatar and Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Qatar and UAE on the other, what gradually emerges from the ongoing divisions among the GCC member states is the outline of an alternative approach to foreign policy. After June 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain suspended diplomatic relations with Qatar and placed it under a complete economic and political boycott, such rifts within the organization deepened. This embargo was widely regarded as one of the more serious internal rifts since the GCC's establishment in 1981, as it cast a massive cloud of uncertainty over the future viability of an organization that was once regarded as essential to regional stability. In light of these

²⁴ Vali Nasr, "All Against All: The Sectarian Resurgence in Post-American Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2022).

²⁵ Trita Parsi, "Why Mohammed bin Salman Suddenly Wants to Talk to Iran," *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2021.

²⁶ Manochehr Dorraj, "Iran's Regional Foreign Policy," in *Interpreting the Modern Middle East: An Introduction*, ed. David Sorenson (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010).

²⁷ Hussein Ibish, "Saudi Arabia's New Dialogue with Iran Was Long in the Making," *Arab Gulf States in Washington*, 14 May 2021.

new developments, it is not far-fetched to conclude that we are now witnessing the declining significance of the GCC as a multilateral security and cooperation forum.

On January 30, 2018, then-US Defense Secretary James N. Mattis and then-Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson, alongside their Qatari counterparts, commented in favor of further cooperation between Washington and Doha at the opening session of the inaugural US–Qatar Strategic Dialogue at the State Department. This event raised a question: Was embarking on a new strategic discussion between the two countries aimed at repairing the rift within the GCC? Or was this new foreign policy directed at rolling back the resurgent regional powers of Iran and Turkey, given the mounting conflict in Syria?

The dispute between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar intensified divisions within the GCC, but it also benefited countries such as Turkey and Iran, whose economic ties with Qatar were deepened. The dispute placed Qatar in a stronger position to outlast the political ambitions of the other Persian Gulf states that followed the Saudis' lead in punishing Qatar for its unorthodox support for the Arab Spring uprisings and its pragmatic economic and political relationship with Iran. Similarly, Qatar's moves in the region to protect migrant workers' rights by abolishing the *Kafala* system of guardianship, as well as serving as a mediator in some key regional conflicts (Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Palestine, to mention only a few), have clearly outperformed Riyadh's ultra-conservative status quo and counterrevolutionary proclivities. Meanwhile, the Al-Udeid Air Base in Doha, the region's largest US air base and home to 11,000 US personnel, has given Qatar a clear advantage in its bargaining position vis-à-vis the other GCC member states. This realization may in part explain the Emirati and Saudi decisions to mend fences with Doha.

Several factors may account for the US attempts at establishing an annual strategic dialogue with Qatar. Iran's status as a regional power was strengthened by the widening divisions within the GCC. The embargo against Qatar pushed Doha further toward economic and pragmatic cooperation with Tehran, as demonstrated by the Islamic Republic's opening up of its air space and flying commercial flights to Doha to relieve the economic pressure on the country in the early days of the GCC embargo intended to bring Qatar to its knees. Doha's subsequent increased commercial and political ties with Tehran has enhanced Iranian stature and influence.

The Qatar crisis helped Tehran put to rest the narrative that Iran's foreign policy is sectarian. The Islamic Republic's foreign policy has focused on improving relations with Sunni actors in the Middle East, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, in addition to Qatar, despite differences over regional crises such as Syria. Closer Qatari–Iranian relations, as one observer aptly noted in 2017, could help enhance a Sunni–Shiite dialogue in the region, especially given that both Doha and Tehran continue to maintain relations with a host of non-state actors whose cooperation is much needed for resolving certain regional conflicts.²⁸ The Iran–Saudi–Emirati dialogue mediated by Iraq in 2021 could be partially understood in this larger context.

Qatar's cooperation with the United States and other regional states to counter terrorist operations carried out by ISIS and Al-Qaeda agents is crucial for present and future counterterrorism programs put in place by the United States and its allies. Qatar's pivotal role in containing such threats and mediating regional conflicts has increasingly gained traction in Washington

²⁸ Giorgio Cafiero, "Iran's Role in Qatar's New Foreign Policy," *Al-Monitor*, 11 July 2017.

and throughout Europe. Without denying the importance of the anti-terrorism campaign, one should not lose sight of the fact that the US–Qatar strategic dialogue is essentially designed to ratchet up US pressure on Doha to align its foreign policy with that of Washington, while also keeping both Tehran and Ankara at bay. In other words, while the United States may find Qatar’s political posture and mediation attempts useful to its own political interests, as long as the US agenda of containing Iran persists, it will seek to limit Qatar–Iran ties.

NEW ACTORS IN THE REGION AND THEIR IMPACT

With Washington’s dependency on imported oil from the Persian Gulf region drastically declining, the United States has turned its attention to the Asia-Pacific region in general and China in particular. The Middle East is unlikely to maintain the pivotal status it once held in US strategic considerations, when its oil deposits were considered critical to the US and global economies.²⁹ The increasing economic strength and volume of trade of the Asian economies, led by China, Japan, South Korea, and India, has expanded the economic prowess of these countries, culminating in a shift of power from the West to the East. China’s increasing need for imported oil from the Middle East, accounting for roughly half of its energy needs, coupled with its ambitious foreign policy, culminating in the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI)—an ambitious geo-economic campaign aimed at building a network of trade routes and transportation, communication, and development projects between China and the Middle East, Central Asia, East and South Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Africa—will have wide-ranging implications for the region.³⁰

As one analyst aptly points out, between 2000 and 2020,

China’s GDP quintupled in size. Its industrial economy is now twice as large as America’s, though its service economy remains much smaller. China has become the world’s largest consumer market and its biggest importer of hydrocarbons. It is an emerging technological superpower in an increasing number of fields. Chinese companies buy one-sixth of GCC’s global oil exports, one-fifth of Iran’s, and half of Iraq’s. China has become the region’s largest foreign investor and trading partner. China has also become a significant collaborator and customer for Israel’s high-tech companies and a partner for Saudi Arabia’s effort to develop a domestic armament industry. Seventeen Arab states have joined the BRI. And in January of 2022, the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain as well as the secretary General of GCC were in Beijing to discuss the expansion of their relations with China. They were followed by foreign ministers of Iran and Turkey.³¹

China is currently the number one trade partner of countries including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates, and its security cooperation with these nations is expanding as well. In addition to the seventeen Arab states mentioned in the quotation above, many countries in the region, most notably Iran and Turkey, are poised to play a significant role in the BRI as well. Thus, China is well positioned to loom much larger in the economy and

²⁹ Michael T. Klare, “From Scarcity to Abundance: The New Geopolitics of Energy,” *Current History* 116:789 (January 2017), 6–7.

³⁰ Mahmood Monshipouri, *Middle East Politics: Changing Dynamics* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 296.

³¹ Chas Freeman, “China in the Middle East,” *Chas Freeman.net*, 22 January 2022. <https://chasfreeman.net/china-in-the-middle-east/>.

by implication the political landscape of the region in future, both among American allies such as Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and the Persian Gulf Arab states of GCC, as well as among such US adversaries as Iran, as indicated by the 25-year trade and security agreement signed between the two countries in 2021.³²

Indeed, the rapid expansion of China's power in the MENA region has brought new urgency to the Biden administration's foreign policy priorities. While in the past decade managing China's influence has been part and parcel of US regional political posture, under Biden it has assumed a new urgency. This is evident in his administration's changing political position toward Saudi Arabia, and regarding the United Arab Emirates and their military involvement in Yemen. During his presidential campaign, Biden promised to make Mohammad bin Salman "pay the price, and make them in fact the pariah that they are."³³ In the early days of his presidency, he ordered that a Trump-era agreement to sell UAE US\$35 billion worth of sophisticated military hardware, including F-35 jet fighters, be put on hold.

Biden had also pledged that if elected as president he would cease US support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen and would lean on the Saudis to end that war, which, according to the United Nations, has created a humanitarian catastrophe in that country. At the time of writing, one year into his presidency, however, his administration has decided to "go back to basics" and continued to support traditional allies in the region. He sold US\$60 million of new armaments to the Saudis and placed blame on the Houthis for the continued war and carnage.³⁴

Despite Biden's attempts to assure traditional Arab allies of his administration's continued support, Arab nations have their own reasons to pursue opportunities to expand their ties with China in the face of declining US power and the unreliability of its protection. They are attempting to hedge their bets and diversify their partnership. Hence, the continuation of US economic sanctions and its hostile political posture has pushed Iran further into the arms of China and Russia. Faced with the possibility that even if it reaches an agreement with the Biden administration over the JCPOA, such agreement may not last beyond his term in office and the new president may decide to abrogate the nuclear deal again, Iran is thus attempting to achieve immunity from sanctions by decoupling its economy from the Western camp and firmly integrating it in the Chinese global economic orbit. This means playing a proactive role in the BRI while expanding economic and security ties with Russia.³⁵

India has also widened its efforts to cultivate economic and strategic relations with Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries, with the aim of bolstering its standing as a regional power poised to offer a counterweight to China's dominant presence in the region. In fact, some of China's regional policies have invited controversy in India. In April 2015, for example, as

³² Manochehr Dorraj, "The Belt and Road Initiative and China's Relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia: A delicate Balancing Act," in *Critical Reflections on China's Belt and Road Initiative*, ed. Alan Chong and Pham Quang Minh (New York: Palgrave/MacMillan Publishers, 2020); Dorraj, "Belt and Road: China's Opportunities and Challenges," in *Rethinking China, the Middle East and Asia in a "Multiplex World,"* ed. Mojtaba Mahdavi and Tugrul Keskin (Leiden and Boston: Brill Publishers, 2022); and Shahram Akbarzadeh and Mahmoud Pargoo, "Iran-China Deal Raises More Questions than Answers," *Middle East Institute*, 27 July 2020.

³³ Trita Parsi and Annelle Sheline, "Biden's Shameful Silence on Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen," *The New Republic*, 13 January 2022.

³⁴ Trita Parsi, "Biden Is Enabling America's Indefensible History with Saudi Arabia," *MSNBC*, 26 January 2022.

³⁵ Freeman, "China in the Middle East," 2.

a part of their BRI, the Chinese moved to strengthen the economic and strategic ties between China and Pakistan by signing a slew of infrastructure contracts worth \$46 billion, which raised significant concern in New Delhi. Moreover, Chinese President Xi promised to direct \$1.6 billion toward development of the Pakistani port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea. In return, the two countries signed a 40-year contract giving China the right to manage the port.³⁶

India has grown far more dependent on oil and natural gas from the Middle East than was previously the case, with 58 percent of its oil and 88 percent of liquefied natural gas imports coming from the Middle East.³⁷ An increasing population, along with rapid economic growth, has led India to become the world's sixth largest consumer of energy.³⁸ As an emerging power and market, India has become a significant political player in the Middle East. With its economy projected to grow at a rate of 7 to 9 percent over the next two decades, despite some negative consequences from the 2008 global recession as well as the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, India must secure long-term access to oil and natural gas resources in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean littoral in order to fuel its economic rise.³⁹ To expand its trade to Central Asia and compete more effectively with China's attempt to develop Gwadar port in Pakistan, India has also invested in developing Iran's Chahbahar port.

Faced with economic sanctions in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation and support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine, Russia has turned to the Middle East with a vengeance. To offset EU and US attempts to isolate Russia, Moscow has adopted its own version of turning "East," in large part to explore new business, energy deals, military contracts, and political alliances there, but also to counterbalance rising Chinese influence in the region. The proximity of the Middle East to Russia's southern border, a region often described as Russia's "soft underbelly," has also taken on a new strategic significance in the eyes of Russian politicians.⁴⁰ Russia continues to reclaim its role as arms supplier to the Middle Eastern states. Its substantial Muslim minority has also contributed to the significance of the Middle East in its political calculus, given the rise of Chechen separatists and radical Islamic movements in the Northern Caucasus, Tatarstan, and other heavily Muslim populated parts of territory. The existence of a large Jewish community in Russia, and several waves of migration to Israel, has drawn Israel and Russia closer together, reinforcing their ties and interconnections.⁴¹

In recent years, some of the Gulf Arab states, which have often sought a potential regional counterweight to Iran and its allies, have come to view Turkey as a crucial part of this equation. More specifically, Turkey has been regarded by Qatar and, prior to Mr Khashoggi's murder in the Saudi embassy in Istanbul, Saudi Arabia, as a crucial ally in a Sunni Muslim coalition in the Middle East to counterbalance potential Shia or Persian ascendancy.⁴² Turkey's relationship with the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf region, however, took an uncertain turn in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, when Ankara supported the uprisings against

³⁶ Monshipouri, *Middle East Politics*, 302.

³⁷ Tanvi Madan, "Why Did Indian PM Modi Drop In on Saudi Arabia Last Weekend?" *Newsweek*, 9 April 2016.

³⁸ Geoffrey Kemp, *The East Moves West: India, China, and Asia's Growing Presence in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 31.

³⁹ Kemp, *The East Moves West*, 24.

⁴⁰ Adrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), 149.

⁴¹ Kemp, *The East Moves West*, 150–2.

⁴² Steven A. Cook and Hussein Ibish, "Turkey and the GCC Cooperation amid Diverging Interests," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington* 1 (February 2017).

the dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. This placed Turkey at odds with the Saudis and Emiratis, who harbored serious concerns over what they perceived to be the destabilizing impacts of supporting these uprisings, displaying an alarmist attitude toward the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Turkish and Qatari patronage of Mohamad Morsi, the first democratically elected leader of Egypt, caused much resentment among the Saudis and some of their allies within the GCC.

Following the 2013 coup in Egypt in which Abdul Fatah el-Sisi, a member of the country's Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), seized power, the Saudis and Emiratis turned against Ankara by freezing Turkey out of regional diplomacy and canceling investments in that country.⁴³ Despite common interests in certain areas and their rapprochement in 2021, Turkey's support for Islamist parties in the region has become unsettling and its long-term regional ambitions remain a concern for Gulf Arab leaders.⁴⁴ This tension and rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Turkey for leadership of the Sunni world came to a head with the murder of Khashoggi in 2019, which Erdoğan used to argue that it is his government and not the house of Saud that is worthy of leadership of the Muslim world. In 2021 the Saudis and Emiratis decided to mend fences and improve economic and political ties with Ankara, as the political cost of continued conflict was proving prohibitive in the face of uncertainties surrounding the reliability of any future US security umbrella and its commitments.

LOOKING AHEAD

Looking back on more than a half-century of US foreign policy in the Middle East, it is clear that many contradictory policies have kept unpopular regimes in power. This has caused disillusionment among Iranian youth, prolonged the plight of the Palestinians, and produced deepening disenchantment with the US foreign policy agenda.⁴⁵ The vexing question facing Washington is: Should it scale back its involvement in the Middle East conflict zones, which has sapped its energy and diverted its resources and focus away from addressing the urgent need for transformation of its economy, infrastructure, and political system, so essential to recapture its lagging competitive edge globally? Witnessing the rapid rise of Chinese influence in the region as that state successfully avoids becoming entangled in regional conflict has revealed the flaws in the US approach toward the region. But as of yet, the power brokers in Washington have refused to chart a fundamentally new course. The machinery of US foreign policy has proven to be remarkably resistant to embracing any new or transformative ways of approaching the region.

The sooner US foreign policymakers recognize that the "Palestine question" still remains relevant in the Middle East, and that Israeli leaders' attempts to force the Palestinians into submission are bound to fail, the more likely the possibility of producing an equitable resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. All previous negotiations have failed to end Israeli occupation and yield a viable, contiguous, and sovereign state for the Palestinians. The Biden administration will squander a great opportunity should it choose to condone or abet the Israeli con-

⁴³ Cook and Ibish, "Turkey and the GCC Cooperation," 5.

⁴⁴ Cook and Ibish, "Turkey and the GCC Cooperation," 17.

⁴⁵ Kylie Baxter and Shahram Akbarzadeh, *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Roots of Anti-Americanism* (London: Routledge, 2008).

fiscation of Palestinian territories. If the two-state solution is given low-key status, or pursued lackadaisically, the fragile ceasefire between the two sides will be short-lived and both parties will be back to square one in the not-too-distant future. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict cannot be left to fester; it is not simply in any one country’s interest in the region that it does.⁴⁶

The September 11 tragedy reminded us of the political consequences of a flawed foreign policy. In the post-9/11 era, America has assumed a more nationalist posture. Absent a clear strategy, the US government’s “war on terror,” as manifested under the George W. Bush administration, appears to have been devised as a legitimization tool for military adventures undertaken at the discretion of politicians and military commanders. The US foreign policy of supporting friendly but corrupt regimes and containing nationalist and hostile regimes has resulted in seemingly irreconcilable and confusing goals. The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan after a 20-year mission proved to be ill-defined and poorly implemented, as demonstrated in the chaos that ensued in Afghanistan and its political fallout for the Biden administration at home. The US troop drawdown from Iraq is likely to pose new challenges to Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, forcing him to tread a careful path between the needs and demands of Iraq’s two key allies—Washington and Tehran. While pro-Iranian factions have called for a full US departure, Iraqi officials have underscored the importance of the ongoing assistance of US forces. This is understandable given that although ISIS is defeated inside Iraq and Syria, its radical ideology persists.⁴⁷

Historically, the dependency on Middle Eastern oil, along with security considerations, has bent US foreign policy further in the direction of propping up autocratic and dysfunctional regimes in the region. The reduction of US troops and military hardware—especially from Iraq and Saudi Arabia, respectively—demonstrates a reconfiguration of the Biden administration’s policies and priorities; so too does Biden’s attempt to restore the nuclear deal with Iran.⁴⁸

Faced with rebuke of its military operations in a deadly and senseless war in Yemen, Saudi Arabia is likely to settle for ceasefire—if not full-fledged peace and reconciliation—with Houthis in Yemen. As we look ahead to the evolution of security dynamics in the region, one of the worrisome unknowns in the Persian Gulf centers on the future of Iran–Saudi relations—whether Iran will be integrated into a regional security structure in the coming years or instead the current Washington policy of containment and confrontation with Tehran will persist. While the US military presence and posture in the region is being reconfigured in order to focus on the larger challenges of China’s economic rise and Russia’s military assertiveness, in the near term, GCC nations and other US regional allies are likely to continue to rely on US arms shipments and military protection.

The early contours of Biden administration’s foreign policy toward the region harbor a great deal of continuity with the past US administrations, starting with Nixon’s presidency. Hence, a war-weary American public is more focused on the improvement of economic and social life at home and the protection of American democracy. While the American people support international engagement, expansion of trade, and diplomacy, they are increasingly

⁴⁶ Mahmood Monshipouri, “Israel Losing the War of Moral Awakening,” *Tehran Times*, 25 May 2021.

⁴⁷ Jane Arraf and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Is Set to Announce Troop Drawdown From Iraq, at Least on Paper,” *The New York Times*, 25 July 2021.

⁴⁸ Murat Sofuoglu, “Why the U.S. Is Pulling Its Missile Systems out of the Middle East,” *TRTWORLD*, 21 June 2021.

skeptical about the use of military force beyond defending the homeland and they favor a decrease in US defense expenditure.⁴⁹ Since these sentiments are more extensively embraced by younger Americans, the US involvement in “forever wars” in the Middle East may prove to be a relic of the past—misguided adventures of a youthful empire, which its graying self may no longer be able to afford. If this becomes an enduring trend, it will have a long-lasting impact on the future contours of both US foreign policy in the Middle East and regional political developments.

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⁴⁹ Trita Parsi, “The End of American Adventurism Abroad?” *International Politics and Society*, 7 January 2022.

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14. China's uneasy balancing in the Persian Gulf

Jonathan Fulton

INTRODUCTION

In January 2016, President Xi Jinping made his first trip to the Middle East–North Africa (MENA) region as chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and president of the People's Republic of China (PRC). His first stop was Saudi Arabia, where he and King Salman signed a comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP) agreement. This is the highest level of diplomatic partnership for the PRC, as will be described below, and the fact that Saudi Arabia was the only Gulf country included at this level was perceived as an important sign. In an intensely competitive region dominated by Saudi–Iranian rivalry, China had long sat on the fence, refusing to overtly favor one side or the other. With the Sino–Saudi CSP, it appeared that Beijing had finally chosen which side of the Gulf it was going to work with.

That changed when, after a short trip to Egypt, Xi flew to Tehran and also signed a CSP agreement with Iran. China's masterclass in Gulf fence-sitting continued, contributing to a perception that China has a neutral stance in a region where neutrality is a difficult option to maintain.

This chapter argues that neutrality is not an accurate description of China's approach to the Gulf. While the CSPs with Saudi and Iran appear to balance each other out, in nearly every other facet of China's Gulf presence—political, economic, and strategic—the Arab side is more closely aligned with China's interests and the relationships are more deeply established.

To develop this argument, the chapter begins with a discussion of what distinguishes the Gulf as a subregion of relative stability within a turbulent Middle East, and then analyzes the political and security order of this subregion in order to understand the pressures that extra-regional states must navigate while developing a Gulf presence. It then discusses China's approach to the Gulf, considering pressures within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), between the GCC and Iran, and between China and the US.

THE PERSIAN GULF SUBREGION

Throughout this century, China has been steadily building a deep, broad, and sustainable Middle East presence.¹ It developed the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum as a means of coordinating agendas with each of the 22 Arab League member states, and its Arab Policy Paper of 2016, released to coincide with Xi's trip, articulated an approach to MENA (albeit one focusing only on Arab countries) for the first time.² While the non-Arab MENA countries

¹ Jonathan Fulton, "China's Changing Role in the Middle East," *The Atlantic Council*, 2019.

² State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Full Text of China's Arab Policy Paper," January 13, 2016.

Israel, Iran, and Turkey do not feature in either of these, China has largely followed the same cooperation and policy priorities for them as well, on bilateral bases.

At the same time, not all MENA states are created equal in the eyes of Beijing, and the same can be said of its subregions. The Maghreb and Levant, both geopolitically important, feature many weak or fragile states, with political turbulence and intense development needs throughout. While China prioritizes good relations with individual states in these subregions—namely Israel, Egypt, and Algeria—neither subregion features prominently in China's foreign policy.

One important factor is the centrality of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in driving much of China's foreign policy agenda since it was announced in 2013. Its two main branches are the overland Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), and in recent years it has expanded to include the Digital Silk Road Initiative (DSRI) and the Health Silk Road. The essence of each component is connectivity across states and regions, either through hard or soft infrastructure projects. The Maghreb's handicap of being the among the least integrated regions in the world limits its potential to play a larger role in China's BRI ambitions, and the Levant, with the exception of Israel, is marred by a lack of security. War in Libya and Syria makes these subregions troublesome as BRI hubs.

The Persian Gulf subregion is a different matter, however. Across most economic, business, and development metrics the six Gulf monarchies (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]) are in considerably better shape than many of their MENA neighbors. Oil wealth combined with relatively small populations has contributed to a much greater level of prosperity and political stability. While Iran and Iraq are comparatively weaker economically and less stable politically, the GCC countries remain relatively stable and attractive destinations for international trade and investment. China became the largest extra-regional source of foreign direct investment into the Middle East in 2016, and Gulf countries have received the lion's share. The Gulf and Arabian Peninsula occupy important geostrategic space as well, and this combined with the factors above contributes to an environment that has become central to China's Middle East engagement.

The nature of China's economic relations with Gulf countries plays an especially significant role. China is the world's largest importer of oil and typically imports 40–50 percent of its oil from the Middle East, mostly from the Gulf.³ This makes the region crucial for both China's energy security and its political stability; the CCP's performance legitimacy model requires economic growth in order to justify the Party's hold on political power.⁴ Economic relations have diversified beyond energy trade, and several Gulf countries have been important sources of contracting for Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and multi-national corporations (MNCs). See Table 14.1.

It is also important in terms of logistics and inter/intra-regional connectivity. Dubai's Jebel Ali Free Zone is a major destination for Chinese shipping, with 60 percent of China's trade to Europe, Africa, and the rest of the Middle East passing through this port.⁵ Industrial parks and port investment in Abu Dhabi, Oman, and Saudi Arabia all feature in China's BRI, connecting

³ International Trade Centre, "China Country Brief," www.intracen.org/country/china/.

⁴ Zhu Yuchao, "'Performance Legitimacy' and China's Political Adaptation Strategy," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16:2 (2011): 123–40.

⁵ Jon Alterman, "Chinese and Russian Influence in the Middle East," *Middle East Policy* 26:2 (2019): 129–36.

Table 14.1 *Value of Chinese contracting in the Gulf, 2005–21*

Bahrain	1.42
Iran	21.84
Kuwait	11.1
Oman	5.41
Qatar	7.7
Saudi Arabia	36.24
UAE	28.37

Source: American Enterprise Institute, *China Global Investment Tracker*. All figures in billions of US\$.

markets and building business clusters and supply chains. This supports trade and investment in the north-west Indian Ocean region, East Africa, and the Mediterranean.

As such, it is clear that within the Middle East, the Gulf subregion plays an important role for China. However, the fractious security environment presents diplomatic challenges for every extra-regional country with deep interests here, and is especially challenging for China given its competitive relationship with the US.

GULF ORDER

Despite the economic and political advantages the Gulf enjoys relative to other MENA sub-regions, it must be emphasized that the area has been extremely combustible since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Iran–Iraq war, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and subsequent Desert Storm, the US war in Iraq, and the war against ISIS have all made for a less stable region. This period of upheaval since 1980 is in marked contrast with the time prior to the Iranian Revolution, when the Gulf was perceived as “a somewhat sleepy corner on the American Cold War map.”⁶ However, ideological rivalry has made for material threats, both political and security in nature, and regime type has seemed to play an important role in alignment choices, with balance-of-threat theory explaining the strategic approach that the Gulf monarchies adopted against their larger and stronger regional rivals, at least during the Cold War. This competitive Gulf order also shaped the approaches of extra-regional actors, who adopted balancing policies to achieve their regional interests. During the 1970s, Baathist Iraq, aligned with the Soviet Union, posed a threat to monarchy in the Gulf, and as a result Iran tended to cooperate with Saudi Arabia during the Twin Pillars period. Like-minded monarchs shared a vision of Gulf order, aligned with the US and against the Soviets and their communist ideology. The revolution in Iran and the assumption of power by the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) dramatically changed this order. Gulf monarchies no longer had a Shah to coordinate with, and instead faced a hostile regime with an anti-monarchical ideology reliant upon an aggressive strand of political Islam as a legitimizing tool. The IRI’s foreign policy, like that of many revolutionary states before it, strove to export revolution, making it a much more threatening neighbor than Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

⁶ Gregory F. Gause, III, “American Policy in the Persian Gulf: From Balance of Power to Failed Hegemony,” in *Gulf Politics and Economics in a Changing World*, ed. Michael Hudson and Mimi Kirk (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2014), 184.

In the post-Cold War era, shaped by US military preponderance, the Gulf monarchies' regional behavior up until the Arab Spring was characterized not by balancing but by bandwagoning. US regional policy largely aligned with their preferences for MENA order, with the exception of support for Israel and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. On most other issues they were largely content to work with American power to pursue their interests. The most important of these was the issue of Iran. US–Iran relations have never recovered from the hostage-taking crisis and it is unlikely that the two countries will be able to resolve their considerable differences as long as the IRI continues its revisionist MENA policy. The US security architecture in the Gulf, centered on a long-standing agreement with Saudi Arabia; defense cooperation agreements with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE; and a facilities access agreement with Oman, has ensured that the GCC states remain stable and prosperous, getting their energy to global markets while deterring Iranian aggression.

Since the Arab Uprisings, however, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have adopted more assertive MENA foreign policies that put them at odds with each other, and frequently the US as well, making bandwagoning a less satisfying explanation for their relationship with the US. President Obama's decision to not support the Mubarak government in Egypt sent a signal to other regional partners and allies that they could no longer rely upon the US to ensure regime stability. During a period of crisis for the monarchies, there was a very real perception that their interests were no longer in alignment with the US.

For regional actors, this resulted in divergent regional foreign policies. The UAE and Saudi Arabia responded with an attempt to shore up an unstable regional status quo, supporting like-minded governments while ending material support for Egypt during the brief Muslim Brotherhood government led by Mohamed Morsi. The muscular foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE were unusual for countries previously seemingly content to avoid leading roles in regional security affairs, leaving them instead for Washington to handle. The UAE's former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, explained the UAE's new approach to regional security affairs: "In this current international system, it is no longer 'write a cheque and someone is going to come and secure the stability in the region.' You have to do some of the burden-sharing."⁷ Qatar's response to the uprisings was to support Islamist groups that were challenging existing governments, both materially and ideationally through Al Jazeera. Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani described the contrasting approaches between Qatar and the Saudis and Emiratis in an American television interview: "We stood by the people. They stood by the regimes. I feel that we stood by the right side."⁸ These contrasting approaches strained GCC unity, with Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE recalling their ambassadors to Qatar in 2014 before the 2017 crisis did more serious damage to an already fragile bloc. Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced a new bilateral alliance, and the GCC's effectiveness as an international organization has come increasingly into question, with Qatar largely isolated and Oman and Kuwait on the sidelines trying to mediate, with little success.

Meanwhile, Iran has capitalized on regional instability in the post-Arab Uprising period. It has used militias in Iraq and proxies in Yemen and Lebanon, and its support for the government in Syria contributed to the Assad regime surviving a challenge to its power. As a result,

⁷ William James, "UAE Ready to Take on Greater Security Burden in Middle East: Minister," *Reuters*, July 26, 2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-yeneb-security-britain-idUSKBN1KG1G6.

⁸ CBS News, "Qatar's Emir Stands Defiant in Face of Blockade," October 29, 2017, www.cbsnews.com/news/qatars-emir-stands-defiant-in-face-of-blockade/.

Iranian influence is such that it boasts of controlling four Arab capital cities: Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, and Sana'a. The expansion of Iranian power and influence across MENA – despite its own substantial domestic political and economic pressures – exacerbates tensions with its neighbors in the Gulf.

The result has been characterized as a new Middle East cold war.⁹ For the wider MENA this contributes to a lack of order, manifested in a “multidimensional geography of rival forces and actors within the context of increasingly multipolar global politics” in which the “inefficiency of balancing, breakdown of regulatory norms, and increased capacities for self-organization by armed non-state actors all help sustain the regional environment of turbulence.”¹⁰ Within the Gulf, however, the bipolar sub-regional order is a useful way of understanding political and security tensions, with revisionist Iran on one side and the Saudi–UAE bloc trying to hold it off. Qatar, no longer formally exiled from the GCC but not fully inside it either, has articulated a need for dialogue with Iran.¹¹ Oman, which facilitated negotiations with Iran leading to the JCPOA, has long advocated for improved GCC–Iran relations. In short, it is a deeply competitive region, causing challenges for external powers trying to establish a sustainable Gulf presence.

HEDGING, NOT BANDWAGONING

For many extra-regional countries, US preponderance has made bandwagoning a sensible Gulf policy. This is especially the case for US allies and partners with deep economic interests with the GCC, such as the European Union, the United Kingdom, Japan, India, and South Korea. In China's case there is a different dynamic at play because of its deteriorating relationship with the US. While Beijing also benefits from the US-led Gulf status quo, tensions between China and the US make bandwagoning problematic. Strategic hedging provides a better framework for understanding China's approach to the Gulf. Rather than an alignment, as practiced in bandwagoning, strategic hedging is an option for a second-tier extra-regional power that wants to pursue its interests without disrupting an advantageous status quo.¹² Successful hedging allows a state to cultivate ties with everyone while carefully avoiding alienating anyone, usually by developing stronger economic and diplomatic relations without introducing an aggressive security presence. Its military capacity is therefore developed haltingly, accepting the preponderance of the stronger state, not challenging it but steadily building a limited capacity to protect its interests and assets while not being perceived as an overt threat. This is a more accurate explanation of the approach that China has been using in the Gulf.

⁹ Morten Valbjørn and André Bank, “The New Arab Cold War: Rediscovering the Arab Dimension of Middle East Regional Politics,” *Review of International Studies* 38:1 (2012): 3–24.

¹⁰ Waleed Hazbun, “In America's Wake: Turbulence and Insecurity in the Middle East,” in *Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East*, POMEPS Studies 34, ed. Marc Lynch and Amaney Jamal, 2019, 14.

¹¹ Simone Foxman, “Qatar Says It's Time Gulf Arabs Start Talks with Iran,” *Bloomberg*, January 18, 2021, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-18/qatar-says-it-s-time-gulf-arabs-start-talks-with-iran?utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&utm_term=210119&utm_campaign=bop&sref=u92xaItB.

¹² Brock Tessman, “System Structure and State Strategy: Adding Hedging to the Menu,” *Security Studies* 21:2 (2012), 193.

As a result, this competitive Gulf order means that China has to consider its Gulf approach at three levels: within the GCC; between the GCC and Iran; and at the international–regional nexus with the USA.

China and the GCC

Within the GCC, China has had to move cautiously. It has comprehensive strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and strategic partnerships with Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait.¹³ Bahrain is the only GCC country without a Chinese partnership agreement. The distinction between the levels is important; a country with a CSP is considered an important actor at both the regional and international level, with dense cooperation with China both economically and politically, as well as established relations in some other area such as cultural or religious affairs. Therefore, there is a hierarchy, and not all partners have the same level of importance to Beijing. When Qatar signed its strategic partnership agreement with China in November 2014 it was days before the 2014 Qatar–GCC rift was to be resolved. The bilateral relationship had significant momentum, with a state visit from the Emir that year and \$8 billion worth of contracts signed that year alone.¹⁴ The Doha branch of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China hosted the Middle East's first renminbi currency swap center and it was used by several regional institutions to finance payment on contracts with Chinese firms; approximately \$86 billion worth of transactions moved through it before a second was activated in Dubai in 2017.¹⁵ Chinese firms had contracts for several big projects, including most notably Lusail Stadium, the opening and closing ceremony venue for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Qatar–China relations were also growing in importance given Beijing's need to make clean energy a bigger part of its consumption. Qatari liquified natural gas (LNG) exports to China are substantial; Chinese demand is projected to increase by 60 percent between 2017 and 2023, at which point Qatar will be its largest source, supplying approximately 28 percent of Chinese LNG imports.¹⁶

Despite these impressive gains, the GCC crisis took a lot of wind out of their sails and few significant deals were announced between the two countries in its aftermath. Officially China professed neutrality and called for a diplomatic solution.¹⁷ However, in the summer of 2018 Xi Jinping returned to the Gulf, paying a state visit to the UAE, where the 2012 strategic partnership was upgraded to a CSP, with China expressing support for “the constructive role being

¹³ On China's use of partnership diplomacy in the Middle East see Jonathan Fulton, “Friends with Benefits: China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Gulf,” in *Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East*, POMEPS Studies 34, ed. Marc Lynch and Amaney Jamal, 2019: 33–8; Degang Sun, “China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Middle East,” in *Routledge Handbook of China–Middle East Relations*, ed. Jonathan Fulton, 2022: 299–311.

¹⁴ Gulf Times, “Qatar and China Sign \$8bn Infrastructure Deals in '14,” April 8, 2015, www.gulf-times.com/story/434171/Qatar-and-China-sign-8bn-infrastructure-deals-in-1.

¹⁵ Nawied Jabarkhyl, “China's ICBC Doha Clears More than \$86 bln in Yuan Transactions,” *Reuters*, April 26, 2017, www.reuters.com/article/icbc-qatar-idUSL8N1HY49U.

¹⁶ Reuters, “China to Become Top Gas Importer in 2019 Boosted by LNG – IEA,” June 26, 2018, www.reuters.com/article/gas-iea/china-to-become-top-gas-importer-in-2019-boosted-by-lng-iea-idUSL1N1TR114.

¹⁷ Jonathan Fulton, “China's Approach to the Gulf Dispute,” *The Asia Dialogue*, May 3, 2018, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/05/03/chinas-approach-to-the-gulf-dispute/>.

played by the UAE in regional affairs.”¹⁸ A flurry of deals were signed and the already dense China–UAE bilateral relationship flourished even further.¹⁹ In January 2019 Qatar’s Emir paid another state visit to China and did not receive the partnership upgrade that the UAE had enjoyed six months before. Instead, the two leaders issued a statement pledging to continue to work with the existing partnership agreement.²⁰ Later that year Qatar removed its name from a list of Muslim-majority countries that supported China’s policies in Xinjiang.²¹

The end of the GCC dispute in early 2021 was welcomed by China, and State Councilor Yang Jiechi was quick to visit Doha shortly after.²² There is an expectation that a return to the GCC will mean Qatar is once again included in more BRI investment. Another sign of momentum came in October 2021 when Foreign Minister Wang Yi travelled to Doha to meet with representatives of the Taliban. While there, he also held meetings with Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, who commented on the “great leaps” the two countries had achieved in recent years and described China as Qatar’s most important investment destination in Asia.²³ This return to normalcy became even more apparent when Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani visited Beijing for the opening of the 2022 Winter Olympics and met with Xi Jinping in the Great Hall of the People.²⁴ However, the Chinese preference for working with states that have strong regional presence and a status quo orientation explains why it privileged the UAE and Saudi Arabia over Qatar. Countries that are not deeply integrated within their own region have less to offer in the BRI and are therefore less important to China’s foreign policy.

China, the GCC, and Iran

It is China’s relations with both Iran and the GCC that confounds most observers. Given the outright hostility of both sides, few understand how China can manage to maintain deep ties with both sides of the Gulf. However, the fact that Beijing has identified Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE as comprehensive strategic partners does not necessarily imply that all meet the same range of interests. In fact, it is clear from even a cursory look at the economic data that Iran is far less important economically, and its strategic importance is also limited given the centrality of the BRI in China’s foreign policy. What looks like a carefully constructed neutral-

¹⁸ Nick Webster, “UAE and China Declare Deep Strategic Partnership as State Visit Ends,” *The National*, August 12, 2018, www.thenationalnews.com/uae/uae-and-china-declare-deep-strategic-partnership-as-state-visit-ends-1.752515.

¹⁹ Jonathan Fulton, “China–UAE Relations in the Belt and Road Era,” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 9:2 (2019), 263–4.

²⁰ Xinhua, “China, Qatar Agree to Deepen Strategic Partnership,” January 31, 2019, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/31/c_137790332.htm.

²¹ Zainab Fattah, “Qatar Withdraws Support for China over Its Treatment of Muslims,” *Bloomberg*, August 21, 2019, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-21/qatar-withdraws-support-for-china-over-its-treatment-of-muslims.

²² Xinhua, “Qatar, China Vow to Enhance Cooperation, Deepen Strategic Partnership,” February 20, 2021, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/20/c_139755323.htm.

²³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Wang Yi Holds Talks with Qatar Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani,” October 27, 2021, www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202110/t20211027_10231519.html.

²⁴ Xinhua, “China Ready to Launch Panda Cooperation with Qatar: Xi,” February 5, 2022, www.news.cn/english/20220205/5617d4b7452649a1b00050b8ebd00ec/c.html.

ity in fact masks the same kind of interest-based approach that was evident in the Qatar–GCC rift; China's interests lie on the Arabian side of the Gulf, but leaders in Beijing see no reason to alienate Iran given the role it could eventually play, both regionally and in terms of China's economic interests.

Looking first at the state of the comprehensive strategic partnerships, it is clear that Iran's is at a less developed stage than those with the Saudis or the Emiratis, a fact that can largely be attributed to Iran's difficult relations with the USA. When the Iranian partnership was signed there was a sense of optimism in some countries that the Joint Cooperative Plan of Action (JCPoA) would result in Iran adopting a more constructive international presence. Given the tremendous economic opportunities it could enjoy with European and Asian markets and investors, there was expectation that a regime under economic duress could follow the path of other revolutionary governments—such as the CCP, for example—and adopt a performance/economic-based legitimacy rather than a religious/ideological one. Chinese diplomacy had played a role in getting the Iranians to agree to accepting the JCPoA, giving China a stake in its continued relevance. Between June 2013 and July 2015 Chinese officials met with their Iranian counterparts on 17 occasions to encourage them to come to an agreement.²⁵ At the same time they linked the possibility of increased investment and economic assistance to successful resolution of the nuclear agreement. It was understood that without a resolution, China would have to make the obvious choice between support for an isolated and disruptive Iran or continued economic engagement with the US. The tremendously lop-sided nature of the relationship reflects an “archetypal Great Power – Middle power partnership, with significant inbuilt power asymmetry,”²⁶ giving Beijing the leverage to convince Iranian leaders that they would not enjoy Chinese support if they chose to forego a deal.

It is in this context that we have to consider the comprehensive strategic partnership. Xi was the first head of state to visit Tehran in the wake of the JCPoA, and the CSP was likely a sign of good faith that Iran would receive political and economic support from China so long as it was committed to building upon the momentum of the JCPoA. This was short-lived, however, because the election of Donald Trump ten months later signaled that the US would soon leave the deal it had spent years putting together. As a candidate, Trump frequently referred to the JCPoA as “the worst deal ever negotiated” and said his “number one priority [was] to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran.”²⁷ At the same time, he campaigned to get tough on China, and leaders in Beijing realized that developing its relationship with Iran would prove costly with the US. In a pattern Tehran is all too familiar with, China prioritized the US over Iran, and the CSP made little headway.

Meanwhile, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE developed their own partnerships with China. The China–Saudi CSP established the High-Level Joint Committee (HLJC), a steering committee for the partnership that is co-chaired by Vice Premier Han Zhang and Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman. It has annual meetings where cooperation projects are prioritized to

²⁵ John Garver, “China and the Iran Nuclear Negotiations: Beijing's Mediation Effort,” in *The Red Star & the Crescent: China and the Middle East*, ed. James Reardon-Anderson (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 139–44.

²⁶ Dara Conduit and Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Great Power–Middle Power Dynamics: The Case of China and Iran,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 28:117 (2019), 468.

²⁷ Kelsey Davenport, “Trump Election Puts Iran Deal in Doubt,” *Arms Control Today*, 2016 www.armscontrol.org/act/2016-11/news/trump-election-puts-iran-deal-doubt.

drive the partnership forward, with each HLJC meeting resulting in several billions of dollars' worth of memorandums of understanding and contracts.²⁸ In the 2019 meeting in Beijing, for example, 35 trade and investment deals worth \$28 billion were signed.²⁹ The China–UAE CSP has also established an elite channel to coordinate their cooperation. Shortly after signing the agreement the Emiratis appointed Khaldoon al Mubarak as the country's first Special Presidential Envoy to China, while State Councilor and former Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi was designated a special representative to the UAE.³⁰ That these high-ranking officials have been chosen to steer the bilateral relationships is a clear signal that Beijing, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi all consider it a priority. Essentially, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have implemented and been developing their comprehensive strategic partnerships with China at high levels since signing them, while it took five years for China and Iran to sign theirs.

Much of the world reacted with trepidation when stories of a 25-year Sino–Iranian partnership were published in the summer of 2020, but it is important to note that the details of the partnership were leaked by the Iranians and no Chinese official confirmed or even commented on them. Furthermore, the most dramatic elements of the leaked document were either unrealistic or not especially novel. On the unlikely side was the \$400 billion sum of Chinese investment supposedly earmarked for Iran, with \$280 billion said to be devoted to energy investments and the remaining \$120 in transportation and manufacturing. This would be a dramatic reversal, both in Chinese overseas investment trends and in Chinese investment in Iran. BRI-related overseas investment has been dropping steadily since a peak in 2016.³¹ Between 2018 and 2019 it fell by 37 percent, to \$77 billion. In 2020, admittedly an unusual year because of COVID-19, it dropped further to only \$11 billion.³² In this context, the idea that Chinese institutions would be eager to finance projects in Iran, with the constant threat of economic sanctions, is not likely. It would also represent a sizable surge in China's investment approach to Iran; the total value of China's investments in Iran between 2005 and 2021 was \$4.72 billion, further underscoring how far-fetched the rumored \$400 billion is.³³

On the not especially novel side were the dramatic reports that China and Iran would be cooperating on military and security affairs, which is perhaps one reason why the partnership was often mistakenly referred to as an alliance. China and Iran already cooperate on joint train-

²⁸ Jonathan Fulton, "Situating Saudi Arabia in China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Asian Politics & Policy* 12:3 (2020), 372–3.

²⁹ Ben Blanchard, "Saudi Arabia Strikes \$10 Billion China Deal, Talks De-radicalization with Xi," *Reuters*, February 22, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-asia-saudi-china/saudi-arabia-strikes-10-billion-china-deal-talks-de-radicalisation-with-xi-idUSKCN1QB15H.

³⁰ Joyce Karam, "UAE Names Khaldoon Al Mubarak First Presidential Envoy to China," *The National*, October 18, 2018, www.thenational.ae/uae/government/uae-names-khaldoon-al-mubarak-first-presidential-envoy-to-china-1.782350; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Yang Jiechi as Special Representative of President Xi Jinping to Visit the UAE, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon and Attend the World Energy Summit in the UAE," January 11, 2019, www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wsrc_665395/t1628944.shtml.

³¹ Derek Scissors, "China's Global Business Footprint Shrinks," *American Enterprise Institute*, July 10, 2019, www.aei.org/research-products/report/chinas-global-business-footprint-shrinks/.

³² Derek Scissors, "China's Global Investment Vanishes Under COVID-19," *American Enterprise Institute*, July 16, 2020, www.aei.org/research-products/report/chinas-global-investment-vanishes-under-covid-19/.

³³ American Enterprise Institute, "China Global Investment Tracker," www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/.

ing exercises and intelligence sharing, and cooperation on counterterrorism, trafficking, and transnational crime—all mentioned in the leaked document—does not target a specific state and is a common concern of states throughout the Gulf region. Whatever security cooperation the two have discussed is, for the time being at least, vaguely articulated, and represents no threat to Gulf stability. Furthermore, China has the same type of security agreement with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In no way does the Sino–Iranian CSP represent a Chinese revisionist approach to Gulf political or security order.

Foreign Minister Wang's March 2021 visit to Iran presented the opportunity to finally sign the long-negotiated agreement.³⁴ Rumors about the leaked document were denied by MOFA spokesman Zhao Lijian, who described it as a plan “charting course for long-term cooperation. It neither includes any quantitative, specific contracts and goals nor targets any third party.”³⁵ When Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited Wang in Wuxi in January 2022m they announced that the deal—rolled out in January 2016—had finally reached the implementation stage. By contrast, it has to be emphasized that China's CSPs with Saudi Arabia and the UAE were immediately operationalized after being signed and in less than a year both were pushing the bilateral relationships to higher levels of engagement.

In the economic realm, it is even more apparent that China's Gulf interests are deeper on the Arab side. In terms of trade, contracting and investment, and institutionalization, the GCC enjoys substantial advantages over Iran. The peak of Sino–Iranian trade was in 2014, when bilateral trade was valued at \$38 billion. That same year Sino–Saudi trade was worth more than \$82 billion and Sino–Emirati trade more than \$48 billion (see Table 14.2). In fact, since 2014 the value of China's trade with Saudi Arabia has been nearly double that of Iran every year. The UAE, with a population an eighth the size of Iran's, trades significantly more with China. Among the GCC states, China's trade with Iran is actually closer in volume to that of Oman on a year-to-year basis, despite the fact that Iran's gross domestic product is nearly six times that of Oman's. Data from the IMF's Direction of Trade Statistics shows that in 2019 China–GCC trade was worth approximately \$176 billion while China–Iran trade was about \$19 billion.³⁶ This has been quite consistent over the past decade. Certainly, sanctions have put an artificial ceiling on Iran's ability to trade, but the fact of the matter is that China has consistently chosen to comply with sanctions regimes rather than do business with Iran. While Iran's untapped market is seen as one of the great opportunities for many multinational corporations around the world, it will remain on the outside while the IRI is a revisionist state. For Chinese companies Iran represents potential while the GCC countries represent a mature, established set of safe trade and investment partners.

This is evident also in contracting data. Chinese firms have done substantial business in Iran, with just under \$22 billion worth of construction contracting between 2005 and 2021. During the same period, however, they have done more business in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, at \$36 billion and \$28 billion respectively. Taken collectively, the GCC states

³⁴ Jonathan Fulton, “Mr. Wang Goes to the Middle East,” *Atlantic Council*, April 2, 2021, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/mr-wang-goes-to-the-middle-east/.

³⁵ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Bahrain, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on March 29, 2021,” March 29, 2021, http://bh.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/202103/t20210329_8903502.htm.

³⁶ International Monetary Fund, “Direction of Trade Statistics,” <https://data.imf.org/?sk=9D6028D4-F14A-464C-A2F2-59B2CD424B85&sid=1515619375491>.

Table 14.2 *Value of China–Iran/GCC states bilateral trade, 2010–19*

Year	China– Bahrain	China–Iran	China–Kuwait	China–Oman	China–Qatar	China–Saudi Arabia	China–UAE
2010	1,351.26	22,936.73	9,145.22	10,220.61	4,329.13	51,198.18	17,705.11
2011	1,764.08	35,596.38	11,934.95	15,287.29	6,649.69	74,629.08	22,757.08
2012	1,729.3	29,104.11	13,085.18	18,590.93	9,276.89	84,413.01	42,103.51
2013	1,856.29	31,065.75	13,038.51	21,622.58	11,110.28	82,559.14	48,398.63
2014	2,618.8	38,055.96	13,038.51	21,622.58	11,110.28	82,559.14	48,398.63
2015	1,886.36	24,053.69	12,152.58	15,883.05	9,055	57,834.38	33,487.06
2016	1,964.38	22,491.97	10,664.99	12,369.91	7,806	47,297.29	31,798.37
2017	2,762.98	26,887.73	13,911.97	15,670.79	10,640.73	45,550.6	59,742.44
2018	2,209.25	30,598.71	6,271.24	20,408.52	13,525.55	59,434.88	53,326.67
2019	2,102.21	19,228.43	17,142.1	16,553.95	12,571.09	72,850.22	55,212.02

Note: All figures in millions of US\$.

Source: International Monetary Fund: Direction of Trade Statistics.

have been worth just over \$90 billion in contracting for Chinese companies since 2005.³⁷ As discussed above, it has been especially difficult to consider the GCC as a unit since 2017, but the fact remains that the Arabian side of the Gulf has been much more lucrative for Chinese companies. It is also worth considering that many of the Chinese firms making headway in the Gulf are state-owned, and this will inform political calculations for Beijing when considering the region.

Geopolitically a similar dynamic is at play. Many posit that the potential to develop land links through the Silk Road Economic Belt component of the BRI makes Iran a more attractive partner for China than the Gulf monarchies. To be sure, Iran was featured as a destination in the first BRI plans while the Arabian Peninsula was not, and Iran's prominence in the China–Central West Asia Economic Corridor was seen as proof of a greater strategic value for Iran. A railway linking Tehran to Yiwu in eastern China opened in 2016, and the first freight train of 32 containers made the journey in 14 days rather than the 30 days it usually took by ship. Narratives about Chinese railways linking Eurasian countries are a prominent feature of BRI analysis, making Iran appear to be an important partner. However, this also needs to be taken in context. As Jonathan Tillman notes in his recent BRI book, “Maritime shipping offers benefits from scale that the railways will never match. Modern ships can carry more than a hundred times as much cargo as a standard train [...] while rail transport will increase, it will make up only a modest share of overall trade.”³⁸ Also, that land-based trade between China and Iran must pass through some combination of Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan is an important consideration. With the exception of Pakistan, these are highly rural and not especially populous or prosperous countries, and all face varying levels of political instability.

³⁷ American Enterprise Institute, “China Global Investment Tracker,” 2021, www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/.

³⁸ Jonathan E. Hillman, *The Emperor's New Road: China and the Project of the Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 46.

The Gulf monarchies, on the other hand, feature in the Maritime Silk Road Initiative leg of the BRI, and this appears to be the more important of the two.³⁹ China has been focused on investing in ports and industrial parks as a means of addressing its limited power projection capacity. The US alliance system has bases across Eurasia and the IOR. China instead has commercial spaces. The Arabian Peninsula may not have featured in early BRI models, but since then Chinese investment into industrial parks and ports in the Gulf, Arabian Sea, and Red Sea has established a supply chain connecting business clusters and linking Chinese commercial entities from the Gulf to the Mediterranean.⁴⁰ During the 2018 CASCF, Foreign Minister Wang announced a framework that brought several projects together under the “Industrial Park—Port Interconnectivity, 2 Wings and 2 Wheels Approach,” including industrial park and port complexes in Abu Dhabi (UAE) and Duqm (Oman), the People’s Liberation Army Navy supply base in Djibouti, Port Said (Egypt), and industrial parks in Jizan (Saudi Arabia) and Ain Sokhna (Egypt).⁴¹ These are all at varying levels of development at the time of writing in early 2022, but when they are taken together with other similar investments across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean one sees how the Arabian Peninsula is a crucial hub in China’s MSRI ambitions, and the depth of China’s existing commercial relations with the GCC support this. In the geopolitical realm too, then, it seems that Iran’s importance is overstated while the Gulf monarchies’ is often missed.

Taken together, what is often described as Chinese neutrality in the Gulf looks more like a carefully constructed approach under which its preference for working with the GCC countries appears balanced by political cooperation with Iran. It is clear, however, that the PRC’s political, economic, and strategic interests are better served by cooperating with the Gulf monarchies.

China, the Gulf, and the USA

At the same time, the fact that the GCC states are all US allies or partners with deep security cooperation makes for a challenging dynamic because the US and China have come to see each other as strategic competitors. This influences China’s relationships in the Gulf, as Beijing has to balance its interests against Washington’s preferences.

That the US has deep political and security relationships with the GCC countries and considers Iran an enemy fuels an argument that China’s more logical relationship is with Iran. There is a perception that the US could use its leverage in Riyadh, for example, to curtail Saudi relations with China, which would have a severe impact on China’s energy security. Because Washington has no such leverage in Tehran, the thinking goes, Iran is a strategic relationship for China, and those with the GCC countries are opportunistic and short-term. John Garver, who has written extensively on Sino–Iranian relations, considered this point after the JCPOA was signed, musing: “Iran promises to be a valuable partner, perhaps even an ally. Saudi

³⁹ Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Colin Flint, “The Geopolitics of China’s Maritime Silk Road Initiative,” *Geopolitics* 22:2 (2017), 223–45.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Fulton, “Domestic Politics as Fuel for China’s Maritime Silk Road Initiative: The Case of the Gulf Monarchies,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 29:122 (2020), 184–9.

⁴¹ Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Kuching, “Wang Yi: China and Arab States Should Jointly Forge the Cooperation Layout Featuring ‘Industrial Park–Port Interconnection, Two-Wheel and Two-Wing Approach,’” July 10, 2018, <https://kuching.chineseconsulate.org/eng/news/t1576567.htm>

Arabia holds no such promise.”⁴² This line of thinking is reflective of a US-centered analysis, however. It is true that the state of alignments in the Gulf and US preponderance is a central consideration for every actor in the region, but it is not a natural law; as an extra-regional power the role of the US has changed over time, and it is likely to continue to do so. China’s approach to the region will evolve in concurrence with the Gulf order.

For the time being, China has proven uninterested in adopting a more central role in Gulf politics or security, and it does not currently have the capacity to do so even if it were willing. The trajectory of its current presence indicates that this might not be the case indefinitely. Its investments in ports and industrial parks around the Arabian Peninsula link with similar Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea projects,⁴³ and while they are commercial in nature (with the exception of the PLAN Supply Base in Djibouti), it is not hard to imagine how these ports could eventually be used for power projection. Should tensions in the US–China relationship escalate, Beijing would likely reevaluate its commitment to a light military footprint in the region, especially given the importance of the Gulf to its energy security. If this were to become the case, it is not certain how it would play out in the Gulf. As discussed above, there is a prevailing assumption that GCC leaders’ interests do not align with Washington as cleanly as they did during the Cold War and in its immediate aftermath. Their economic futures are in Asia, where most of their oil and gas is sold. It could well be that a future Gulf order is influenced more by Asian partnerships than Western ones, and if this is the case then China can be expected to play a significant role. Until then, Chinese leaders have seemed content to engage with the region as they found it: a US-centered one, at least in the security realm. China’s regional outreach appears designed with the US in mind; the BRI cooperation priorities do not include security or military issues, and the initiatives highlighted in the Arab Policy Paper focus on economic and developmental endeavors.

At the same time, tensions in the Sino–US relationship have shown signs of spilling over into the Gulf. The designation of China and Russia as the US’s strategic competitors makes official what has long been apparent: that the long and uneasy relationship between Beijing and Washington has entered a more challenging stage. Given the deep security cooperation between the US and each of the GCC states and the increasingly important coordination between China and all Gulf countries, there is a possibility that the region could become a theatre of great power competition, further undermining an already fragile regional order.

CONCLUSION

China’s approach to the Gulf region has been cautious and deliberate, and developed in such a way as to avoid alienating any regional countries or challenging US interests. Through its strategic partnership diplomacy and a refusal to balance against Gulf countries, China has been able to build political capital among intense rivals while differentiating itself from the US. Its tremendous economic clout has further contributed to Beijing’s growing regional

⁴² John Garver, “China and Iran: An Emerging Partnership Post-Sanctions,” *Middle East Institute*, February 8, 2016, www.mei.edu/publications/china-and-iran-emerging-partnership-post-sanctions.

⁴³ See David Brewster, “Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls: The Strategic Geography of China’s New Pathways in the Indian Ocean,” *Geopolitics* 22:2 (2017): 269–91; Blanchard and Flint, “The Geopolitics of China’s Maritime Silk Road.”

influence, and this will only intensify as BRI projects—especially those associated with the DSR and Health Silk Road—bring regional states deeper into China's orbit. As long as these opportunities hold, China's strategic hedging approach will allow it to continue to maintain deep ties on both sides of the Gulf—but, as discussed here, it would be a mistake to take this as evidence of Chinese neutrality. Its interests, like those of other extra-regional powers, are not linked to a particular state or a group of states, but rather to the maintenance of regional stability. Cooperation with the Gulf monarchies contributes more to this than the revisionist Iran. As such, we can expect to see the GCC countries continue to play a more substantive role in China's Middle East policy.

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15. A new regional fault line: the Middle East divided in search of a post-revolutionary order

Andreas Krieg

INTRODUCTION

Research on the sources of instability and insecurity in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has long focused predominately on sectarian fault lines that divide the region. Many of the conflicts between the region's major powers and their proxies – not least between Saudi Arabia and Iran – have been reduced to matters of sectarianism based on the religious divides of Islam. Yet, while much of that particular confrontation between the Saudi kingdom and the Islamic Republic can be reduced to clashing geostrategic interests, one of the most important and often neglected divides in the MENA region is not geostrategic but ideological in nature.

This chapter argues that the Arab Spring, with its ongoing revolutions and counterrevolutions, has over the past decade revealed a new regional fault line, whose ideological premise is unrelated to the sectarian divide between Islamic sects. As one of the most disruptive regional events in modern history, the revolutions and their aftermaths left regional players – state and non-state actors – ontologically divided over how to best achieve regional security and stability moving forward. The question of how to address the grievances of people in the region and how to reorder socio-politics in the aftermath of violent revolutions and civil wars has divided the region into revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries.

On one end of the ideological spectrum are those actors who supported revolutionaries in their ambitions to create more inclusive governance systems that would be able to allow for more public participation, accountability and social justice. The most prominent patrons to mention here are Turkey and Qatar, together with a range of civil-societal actors of which many were tied into the Islamist spectrum. On the other end of the ideological spectrum are those who have been trying to actively undermine the achievements of the revolutionaries by recreating new authoritarian regimes who would object even to more public participation and accountability, never mind allow for more inclusive governance. At the helm of this counter-revolutionary effort stand the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with their principal ideological allies in the region: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and Syria.

This chapter intends to show how ideological differences over opposing visions for the post-revolutionary order have created grand-strategic fault lines in the region that polarize not just academic debates but conflict environments. These opposing visions are transported by weaponized narratives that have mobilized surrogates from Tunisia over Libya, Egypt and Syria to the Gulf and Yemen. While the principal patrons, Qatar and the UAE, went head to head in the Gulf crisis between 2017 and 2021, their lukewarm reconciliation since suggests that the ideological differences are far from bridged and will continue to fuel polarization across the region. This new ideological divide has arguably already become a greater source of regional identity politics than sectarianism is, pitting those for whom the struggle for more

inclusive governance and social justice is far from over against those who wish to return to a sense of authoritarian stability.

This chapter commences by outlining the ideological rift between the revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries in relation to its main sponsors and protagonists. It will then highlight how these visions and their narratives have mobilized and demobilized people across the region in a new form of identity politics that has created a new ideological fault line that exacerbates regional polarization, confrontation and conflict.

THE REVOLUTIONARY VISION

The protests and revolutions that swept across the Arab world in the early 2010s were the most cataclysmic events in recent Middle Eastern history, substantially putting into question basic assumptions about security and stability in the region. The revolutions also fundamentally reshaped academic and public discourse over the future of socio-politics in the region. Regimes and analysts alike had thought that stability and security in the region could be maintained by strongmen and their extensive security sector apparatuses, who understood how to accommodate or coerce citizens into submission. In virtually every Middle Eastern state, authoritarians had found ways and means to subvert civil society to ensure regime security. Security sectors had been coup-proofed to ensure that those under arms did not pose a threat to those in power. The analogous public sphere had been consumed by the state, with journalists and media outlets compromised, leaving little if any room for dissent.¹ On the eve of the Arab Spring in late 2010, most observers in and outside the region were consumed by the myth of authoritarian stability, namely the notion that despite growing socio-economic, demographic and political grievances the decade-old authoritarians, backed by western support, would be able to withstand any internal pressure.²

This myth, as Gause called it, of the resilience of Arab authoritarians quickly went up in flames when, after weeks of protests, Tunisian strongman Ben Ali resigned in January 2011. The domino effect that unfolded saw Egyptian president Mubarak resign in February under the weight of mass protests before protests swept over into Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. A few months later in autumn 2011, three decade-old regimes had fallen, in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, while the regimes in Yemen and Syria were under immense stress, and the royal family of Bahrain was only saved by the military intervention of neighbouring Gulf states. Civil society 2.0, empowered by digital technology, had found loopholes in the police state surveillance. The socio-economic and political grievances of an entire generation in the Arab world had become so unbearable that it did not take much to break the barrier of fear that for decades had kept dissent under control. The individual fate of the street vendor Buazizi in Tunisia created a martyr whose story inspired others to move. Egyptians were emulating Tunisians, recognizing that the causes and grievances of their north African neighbours were quite similar to those in Egypt.

¹ See Andreas Krieg, *Socio-Political Order and Security in the Arab World* (London: Palgrave, 2017).

² Gregory Gause, 'Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability,' *Foreign Affairs* 90 (2011).

The sparks that were broadcast over conventional and social media across the Arab world ignited a tinder box and created a regional conflagration that shook the old regimes to their core. Their regime security could no longer be secured through coercion alone, and means of accommodation had run dry in the macro-economic decline of the region that followed the global financial crisis. While western policymakers and analysts were caught by surprise, most of the old regimes feared that they could be next. Seeing Ben Ali going into exile, Mubarak being arrested and Gadhafi executed in cold blood meant that the states and their regimes in the region built up their defences. Especially in the Gulf, the old monarchies became paranoid, with regime security fearing that the developments under the banner of 'democracy' and 'social justice' could fundamentally redefine their *raison d'être*.

The exception here was the small emirate of Qatar, which, blessed with unprecedented wealth per capita and an intimately connected local population free of any noteworthy public grievances, surprisingly started to take the side of the reformists and revolutionaries. Supported by Turkey, Qatar, with its powerful broadcaster Al Jazeera, threw its financial weight and considerable influence behind the cause of anti-authoritarianism, championing those groups who wished to replace the old status quo in the region. Not consumed by fears of regime security, Qatar's leadership under Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani had the privilege of experimenting with a new regional order. The Emir and his close confidants understood themselves as revolutionaries in their own country, having supported Qatar's hyper-development in the 1990s and 2000s with far-reaching societal reforms. The developments in Tunisia seemed to confirm a deep-seated belief among Qatar's leadership that sustainable governance in the Arab world had to rest on a degree of public participation, social justice and freedom from oppression. And although Hamad bin Khalifa repeatedly made references to democracy in interviews when discussing his reform initiatives,³ Qatar was neither en route to becoming a constitutional monarchy nor necessarily prescribed a western form of democracy as the panacea to the grievances of protestors.

For this small state wedged between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Arab Spring was seen as an opportunity rather than a threat – a chance to increase its own influence and build networks that could become instrumental in shaping a new regional order. While these geostrategic considerations certainly played a pivotal role in driving Qatar to move from a neutral broker in the region to one that took sides, Qatar's proactive engagement during the early years of the Arab Spring must be predominately understood as an ideational struggle. In the absence of a well-defined strategy, Qatar had an ideological vision that it thought it shared with the movers and mobilizers across the region. Based on its sense of self as the often invoked *Kaaba al Madiyoum*, or Kaaba for the dispossessed and oppressed, a vision started to emerge around Qatar's leadership that suggested that the identity of the country was tied to its assistance to those in the region who had been persecuted or oppressed. The Qatari peninsula had a long tradition of attracting exiles, such as pirates, outlawed sheikhs, persecuted Islamists and other dissidents.⁴ Stemming from this self-perception as a haven for the region's reformists and revolutionaries, Emir Hamad bin Khalifa and his government developed a vision for reform that they thought would coincide with the ideas of those who had taken to the streets across the region.

³ Ed Bradley, 'Qatar Embracing Democracy', *CBS 60 Minutes*, 25 July 2003. www.cbsnews.com/news/qatar-embracing-democracy/.

⁴ David Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City State* (London: Hurst, 2016), 33.

Built around the narratives of socio-political participation, social justice and freedom from oppression,⁵ Qatar hoped it could capture the mood of the day in the region. And rather than opposing this regional struggle against the old regimes, Qatar thought it would be able to establish itself firmly within the camp of reformists and revolutionaries who, at least for the moment, seemed to be on the right side of history. This notion rested on the naïve expectation that Doha's repeated mantra of 'supporting the people' in this dichotomous struggle with the regimes was a straightforward exercise. The enthusiasm over its newly found soft power undermined Qatar's ability to rationalize that what seemed like a unity of revolutionary effort across the region was in fact far more diverse. While the first movers had been mostly liberals who thought that the antidote to authoritarian mismanagement and corruption was liberal democracy, they only represented a small minority within the wider spectrum of revolutionaries. Tech-savvy and well educated, the liberal first movers relied on their extensive networks to create a small but growing public sphere that, at least online, was outside the reach of repressive regime censorship. However, what made the protests so powerful was the ability of the first movers to reach beyond the well-educated and often bourgeois echo chamber to reach wider parts of society whose trigger for mobilization was less socio-political liberalization, more social justice. In Tunisia, Egypt and Libya it was the expansion of the civil-societal space beyond the elitist, bourgeois online public sphere that created a momentum which regimes found it difficult to contain.

Only as that momentum grew were the first movers joined by the traditional opposition to the authoritarians: the Islamists. With its powerful networks, especially in Egypt, the awakening of the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*) was a game changer for the mobilizing power of the revolutionaries. Political Islam had coexisted with the regime, filling a civil-societal niche that the regime willingly surrendered in an attempt to appease the reformists. Islamists were able to offer both sustainable networks that could easily be mobilized to increase protest participation and powerful narratives that framed political grievances through a religious lens. *Ennahda* in Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, *Al Islah* in Yemen and the Islamist nexus in Libya and Syria all provided a powerful narrative of social justice, freedom from corruption and political elections that appeared to answer the calls for reform from those protesting. Better organized, better funded and with more experience of mass mobilization, the Islamists were quick to consume much of the civil-societal space that had emerged during the protests.

Meanwhile, Qatar had placed its bets on the protestors and revolutionaries, throwing the full weight of its soft power behind the common cause: removing the authoritarian regimes. Under the banner of 'supporting the people', Al Jazeera in particular became the most important force multiplier for secular first movers and Islamists alike. Qatar did not enter the Arab Spring with a clearly thought-through strategy providing a roadmap for what would come after the fall of the old regimes. Its vision, built around socio-political participation, social justice and freedom from oppression, provided little more than empty narrative shells that Doha wanted the revolutionaries to fill themselves. Qatar did not set out to install a particular regime but to provide revolutionaries of all colours with platforms to express their grievances and mobilize fellow countrymen and women to revolt against the old order.

Yet, due to better networks and inroads made in Qatar, the Islamists emerged as the better funded and better organized stakeholders in the unravelling competition for revolutionary

⁵ Andreas Krieg, 'The Weaponization of Narratives amid the Gulf Crisis.' In *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (London: Palgrave, 2019), 98.

leadership. While the call to the revolution appeared to be fairly united in the face of the old regime as the common enemy, the vision for the post-revolutionary future was far more divided. Secular liberals and conservatives protested side by side with moderate and more extremist Islamists sustaining mass protests that might have been triggered by the same grievances but did not necessarily pursue the same objectives. Especially as the revolutions matured, causing some regimes to fall and others to double down with armed repression, the revolutionary space and discourse became ever more radicalized. The lack of international support, coupled with the growing desperation of many moderates whose aspirations were unfulfilled, created an ever more polarized revolutionary environment defined by diverting opinions over ends, ways and means. In Libya and Syria, where the revolutions turned into civil wars, Qatar did not shy away from increasing its support for revolutionaries beyond the information space to include first material and later armed assistance – adding another military layer to the revolutionary cause.

As the revolutions descended into polarization, radicalization and militarization, the narratives of socio-political reform were undermined by the more immediate cause of containing the rise of jihadism. The discourse in western media, academia and policy circles changed from the promising Arab Spring to one that more and more resembled the label of an ‘Arab Winter’.⁶ By 2013, as the Syrian and Libyan revolutions ended in a brutal civil war while the first elected president in Egypt was struggling to keep his head above water, the Qatari moment appeared to be over. But despite Qatar’s withdrawal from the regional theatres as a proactive player, its vision for sustainable governance remained firmly anti-authoritarian, focused on narratives of socio-political participation, social justice and freedom from oppression. Qatar remained ambiguous about whether this vision could be achieved through liberal democracy, constitutional monarchy or some hybrid form of Arab democracy. At the heart of this vision is the ontological belief that security and stability in the region is most effectively achieved through inclusive governance that allows people to participate in civil-societal discourse at the least and elections at best, where the distribution of wealth follows norms of social justice and not patrimonial interests of ruling elites, and where the security and rights of all individuals are guaranteed. It provides a vision for new regional order where individual rights are not inferior to the rights of states or regimes and where socio-political stability is guaranteed through inclusive discourse involving all stakeholders.

This reformist and somewhat liberal worldview appears to be overly idealistic and removed from the immediate challenges that the revolutions faced through polarization, religious fault lines and growing violence. This vision lacked a strategic foundation able to translate this vision into implementable policy. By never prescribing particular ways and means of achieving this vision, its cornerstones remained mere narratives that became vulnerable to the exploitation of the counterrevolutionaries. Unable to produce order in the post-revolutionary chaos, the ambition fell short of achieving its potential – especially once counterrevolutionaries started to tend the grievances that remained.

⁶ Haaretz, ‘The Arab Spring Turned into Arab Winter’, *Haaretz*, 19 December 2011.

THE COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY VISION

Revolutions are messy, and the enthusiastic hope of those mobilizing against the old regimes, that the road from protest to a new socio-political order would be smooth, was quickly crushed. The post-revolutionary environment was defined by uncertainty, insecurity, instability and often violence, laying bare the various societal fault lines that had previously been contained by authoritarian repression. Especially as disagreements over means and ways of achieving the objectives of the revolutions became more widespread, the unity of effort that had overwhelmed the repressive security sectors of the old regimes was quickly disintegrating. While Syria quickly fell into a state of civil war, interim governments in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt were trying to take control of what had been highly centralized and personalized governance systems while managing the expectations of revolutionaries. Elections alone were unable to address the more fundamental socio-economic grievances that had brought the masses onto the streets. And the issue of social justice remained, as post-revolutionary leaders failed to inclusively cater to all grievances alike amid an initial phase of power consolidation. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Egypt, where the newly elected President Morsi appeared to monopolize power in the fear that the praetorian guard of the military would remove him – all that while pressing reforms to address socio-economic grievances were stalling. The immediate post-revolutionary environment provided an ideal context for those who were looking for opportunities to roll back the achievements of the revolutionaries.

Whereas Qatar had championed socio-political change through its support for the revolutions, its neighbour the United Arab Emirates (UAE) saw the developments in 2010 and 2011 much more through a security lens – as a threat instead of an opportunity. Unlike Qatar, the UAE as a federal state was far less homogenous, with a socio-economic north–south divide, whereby the northern emirates were traditionally less affluent than the southern emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Despite being a federation of emirates, the political centre of gravity had been shifting noticeably towards the south as well, exacerbating existing socio-economic grievances. Thus, Abu Dhabi did not have the same privilege to experiment with the Arab Spring as Doha. More so, led by a military-minded man, Mohamad bin Zayed al Nahyan (MbZ), Abu Dhabi approached regional and domestic developments more through the lens of securitization, risks and threats.

The existing fault lines between north and south in the country were identified early on as a potential vulnerability for the UAE – especially as, unlike Qatar, the UAE had a political movement of its own that for years had called for political liberalization. *Al Islah* had emerged as a movement in the 1970s from exiled Islamists who had fled in their thousands from Egypt to the Gulf to escape political persecution. As in other Gulf states, these Islamists helped Gulf rulers to fill capacity shortages in their fast-growing bureaucracies. *Al Islah*'s call for socio-political reform and more public participation in politics, however, did not only resonate with expat communities; it also attracted Emiratis who felt that political reforms could help deal with socio-economic and socio-political grievances.

Initially the UAE had answered the call by NATO to support operations in Libya, also in the hope that it would provide an avenue to influence outcomes on the ground. Overwhelmed by the developments across northern Africa, however, Abu Dhabi was quickly relegated to the position of passive onlooker as Qatar threw the weight of its soft power behind the revolutionaries – including, increasingly, Islamist groups. Not only did this increase suspicion in the UAE, but it heightened fears about regime security, as the momentum for mobilization

might empower Emirati dissidents to move. And instead of reacting to potential dissidence at home through accommodation, Abu Dhabi's posture increasingly appeared like that of a fierce state, that is, one that deals with societal grievances exclusively through repression rather than engagement.⁷

As dissidents were rounded up domestically,⁸ MbZ started to securitize developments regionally – not least Qatar's active support to Islamists and other civil-societal actors in the region. Qatar's pro-revolutionary stance and call for social justice and more socio-political participation, in the eyes of Abu Dhabi, not only provided legitimacy for activists in northern Africa or the Levant to move against their regimes, but also indirectly empowered activists in the Arabian Peninsula to mobilize against the less stable tribal monarchies. The post-revolutionary chaos in many Arab countries constituted a security nightmare for MbZ and his idea of strong states. Civil-societal actors dominated the political discourse as a diverse range of opinions over the post-revolutionary order were clashing – first in the information space and then on the battlefield. For Abu Dhabi, the disintegration of the old regimes left a vacuum that non-state actors were filling. The multipolarity that started to emerge in the region created a level of complexity that contradicted the Emirati vision for a stable regional order.

As opposed to Qatar, the UAE's vision for a post-revolutionary order was not one that would provide an emergent civil society with the space to develop a societal consensus amid a messy period of transition. The revolutionary calls for social justice, more socio-political participation and freedom from oppression echoed by Qatar came at too high a price for Abu Dhabi. The erosion of statehood in the process of reconstituting new forms of governance in the Arab world was an unacceptable consequence of revolution for a regime for which the individual always came second to securing the interests of the state. The ontological individual-centric approach to stability and security that was advanced by the revolutionaries quintessentially contradicted the Emirati notion that stability and security in the region could only be guaranteed by strong states built around strong security sectors. Political power and military force had to be monopolized by the regime in what appeared to be an almost Hegelian understanding of the dominance of the state in determining what is best for the individual.⁹ And the post-revolutionary developments appeared to prove MbZ right: the emotionally charged discourse of the revolutionaries appeared to contradict the reason and rationality of the state.

Revolutionary ideals of socio-political participation in governance were therefore the antithesis of Abu Dhabi's concept of the absolute power of the state, which, in the context of the monarchies of the Gulf, would translate into the absolute power of the regime. Much more, political Islam appeared to undermine the Emirati idea of state-centrism, as it is meant to empower the community against the oppression of the state while submitting only to the absolute power of God. Islam's power of appeal to Muslim dissidents had long been a thorn in the side of MbZ's personal project of building a state around a leadership cult and

⁷ Nazih Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 449.

⁸ Reuters, 'UAE Islamist Group Denies Reports It Has an Armed Wing', *Reuters*, 23 September 2012.

⁹ Georg W.F. Hegel, *Hegel: Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts. Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft* (Berlin: Eduard Gans, 1829), §29A.

hyper-nationalism. The transnational nature of political Islam and God-given legitimacy appeared – in the eyes of MbZ – to undermine an integral element of the UAE's vision for resilient states: absolute loyalty to the state and the submission of the individual to the power of the state.¹⁰

Consequently, the UAE looked on in shock at first the revolutions unfolding, and then second, the rise of political Islam in the vacuum of collapsing regimes. Initially, the UAE responded merely domestically to the upheaval by coup-proofing the regime and ensuring that potential dissidents and revolutionaries were put out of action. Those who sympathised with protestors were either deported,¹¹ stripped of their citizenship or put on trial on bogus charges of 'terrorism'.¹²

By 2013, however, the UAE had spotted an opportunity to subvert the revolutionary dynamic as post-revolutionary fatigue, disillusionment and fatigue set in in Egypt. With President Morsi struggling to address widespread grievances in the country, Abu Dhabi attempted to fight back. Without directly targeting revolutionaries, the main focus of the UAE's subversion campaign was the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood, who had gambled away much of the public's good will. Abu Dhabi started to tend protest and dissent in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood with a targeted narrative campaign spread over social media and conventional media outlets.¹³ Protestors and influencers were paid to demonize the Brotherhood, spreading nationalist narratives that called for their removal.¹⁴ Over the course of six months, the UAE was able to ripen a counterrevolutionary moment that came in June 2013 with hundreds of thousands of aggrieved Egyptians taking to the streets mobilized through weaponized narratives against the Brotherhood. The UAE had created a pretext for the Egyptian military to exploit. On 3 July 2013 the military staged a coup, arresting the president and claiming it was acting with legitimacy conferred on it by protestors on the street.

The UAE-conspired coup in Egypt marked the beginning of the end of the revolution and the start of the counterrevolution, as Abu Dhabi understood that whatever tools revolutionaries had used to mobilize against the old regimes could now be reverse-engineered to restore a version of the old order. The grievances of revolutionaries over unfulfilled promises and the disproportionate representation of Islamists in the transnational bodies of power could be exploited to subvert the new status quo in the region and roll back the achievements of the revolutions. In particular, the myth of authoritarian stability provided a powerful counter-narrative to that which the revolutionaries and Qatar had put forward in 2010 and 2011. The mobilization and activism that had become a threat to authoritarian regime security at the beginning of the Arab Spring could now be rechannelled to restore an old order secured by authoritarian regimes who would control civil society and limit socio-political participation –

¹⁰ Hussein Ibish, 'Is the Muslim Brotherhood Targeting the UAE', *Now*, 8 January 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20130116153821/https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/is_the_muslim_brotherhood_targeting_the_uae.

¹¹ Sophia Jones, 'Meet the Arab Spring Activist Deported by the UAE Who Is Now Speaking Out', *The Huffington Post*, 1 November 2014.

¹² Lori Boghardt, 'The Muslim Brotherhood on Trial in the UAE', *The Washington Institute*, 12 April 2013. www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muslim-brotherhood-trial-uae.

¹³ Neil Ketchley, *Egypt in a Time of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 104.

¹⁴ Amy Holmes, *Coups and Revolutions: Mass Mobilization, the Egyptian Military, and the United States from Mubarak to Sisi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 252.

all justified under the banner of fighting terrorism. The terrorism label became a broad-brush label, used not just to undermine the legitimacy of the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam more widely but also to justify a widespread clampdown against activists, civil society groups and dissident voices in the region. The creeping return to more exclusive power, a more constrained public sphere and more oppression, first in Egypt, then in Libya and Tunisia, while regimes in Syria and Bahrain were able to fully restore their power, was seen as a necessary evil to return a sense of regional stability.

THE CLASH OVER VISIONS AND NARRATIVES

While the Arab Spring has moved from revolution to counterrevolution, it would be too hasty to say that the counterrevolutionaries won. The socio-political upheaval sparked by events in 2010 and 2011 is a dynamic and gradual process, which is far from over.¹⁵ At a time when authoritarianism appears to have triumphed over revolution, it is important to remember that the old order has disappeared and been replaced with a new one that has created both more resilient civil-societies and more resilient regimes that have shown an understanding of how to manoeuvre the dynamics of civil-societal mobilization. Both visions – the revolutionary one and the counterrevolutionary – retain their appeal both within and outside the region, rallying supporters around the flag while continuously polarizing debates, fragmenting social and political processes and causing conflict. The ideological divide, which revolves around different ontological visions of how to create a more stable regional order, creates perceptions of ourselves and the other. Among policymakers, academics, journalists and other members of the public, the post-revolutionary divide is not about sectarian, ethnic or religious belonging but ideological belonging. It has created a new form of identity politics that is rooted in political culture and ontology rather than geostrategic interests or religious sectarianism.¹⁶

The first time this ideological clash became apparent was in Egypt in 2012–13, when self-proclaimed liberals started to clash with Islamists. The externally ripened Tamarod movement was built around local grievances regarding a revolution that failed to deliver, making the Muslim Brotherhood the scapegoat for a lack of socio-political and socio-economic progress. Against the backdrop of the ‘Global War on Terror’ that had successfully framed Islam and Islamism as the greatest menace to global security and stability, events in Egypt in 2013 laid the foundation for an ideological struggle against the achievements of the revolutions under the banner of fighting ‘terrorism’. The simplistic binary choice between political Islam, framed as ‘terrorism’, and military authoritarianism, framed as the ‘strong hand of the people’, confronted Egyptians with the need to take sides. The military coup created a precedent for the rest of the region, opening up a new ideological fault line that would be seen again in 2014 in Libya. Again with Emirati support, the warlord Haftar presented himself as the panacea for post-revolutionary chaos in the country, hoping to mobilize a sufficiently large constituency to help him fight ‘terrorism’. So-called *Operation Dignity* was meant not just to drive out

¹⁵ Marc Lynch, ‘The Arab Uprisings Never Ended: The Enduring Struggle to Remake the Middle East,’ *Foreign Affairs* 110 (January/February 2021).

¹⁶ Curtis R. Ryan, ‘Inter-Arab Relations and the Regional System.’ In *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Marc Lynch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 119.

jihadists from Libya but to fight Libyan revolutionary armed groups that had emerged in 2011.¹⁷ By changing the narrative around revolutionary militias and offering the prospect of a strong state with strong institutions under his leadership, Haftar started to shift how Libyans and international policymakers viewed the post-revolutionary environment.¹⁸

Resurgent jihadism in Syria and Iraq amid the sudden rise of ISIS increased the urgency in western capitals to ensure that the ungoverned spaces created by the revolutions would not become breeding grounds for new terrorist outfits. The counterrevolutionary narrative offering strong states and authoritarian control, putting a lid on any form of political Islam, suddenly started to become ever more attractive. The tangible threat of ISIS in the region and overseas meant that authoritarian stability might seem the lesser of two evils, as socio-political liberalization and more public participation appeared to create more short-term instability. In Syria, Assad had purposely released imprisoned Islamists and jihadists to the frontline, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy in which he became the last bulwark against 'terrorism'. Russia's intervention in Syria in support of Assad was not just a gamechanger for the civil war but ensured the survival of the authoritarian regime, while primarily targeting armed revolutionaries – not ISIS.¹⁹ After Qatar had already withdrawn from the Syrian environment in 2014, Turkey stood alone to support abandoned revolutionaries as the United States and its western allies were preoccupied with the jihadists. Since 2018 it has been Abu Dhabi leading the Arab effort to normalize relations with the Assad regime to further reconstitute the authoritarian order – something Qatar strongly opposes.²⁰

The preliminary climax of this ideological rift in the region came in 2017, with the Gulf crisis that saw Qatar targeted by its neighbours, under the leadership of the UAE, for its support for 'terrorism'. Borrowing from its counterrevolutionary narrative repertoire built since 2013, Abu Dhabi sensed an opportunity to undermine Qatar's continuously liberal stance towards the revolutionary generation. Trump, as an inexperienced president with clear neo-conservative tendencies, appeared susceptible to the securitization of Qatar. Doha, which had already withdrawn from its revolutionary adventures in the region in 2013 and 2014, was still operating Al Jazeera as the most powerful voice of socio-political reform in the region. It continued to provide a platform to dissenters of all shapes and forms – including Islamists – to speak out against authoritarianism. Qatar still saw itself as a *Kaaba al Madiyoum* hosting dissidents and revolutionaries, lending its tacit support to those activists, academics and journalists who opposed the counterrevolutionary wave the UAE had set in motion. Therefore, for MbZ, who had found an ally in aspiring Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MbS), Qatar still constituted a tangible threat to the regional order and regime security at home. The blockade against Qatar was meant to be a prelude to a military operation that never came. Stuck in stalemate for years, the standoff in the Gulf showcased more clearly than any other post-revolutionary event how deep the ideological fault lines ran, as the conflict derailed into a war over narratives.

¹⁷ Anas El Gomati, 'Libya's Political Culture Wars', *Sadeq Institute, Long Read* (16 November 2020), 21.

¹⁸ Ibid, 22.

¹⁹ Jack Stubbs, 'Four-Fifths of Russia's Syria Strikes Don't Target Islamic State: Reuters Analysis', *Reuters*, 21 October 2015.

²⁰ Al Jazeera, 'Qatar Has No Plan to Normalise Ties with Syria: Foreign Minister', *Al Jazeera*, 12 November 2021. www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/12/qatar-has-no-plan-to-normalise-ties-with-syria-says-fm.

Often erroneously labelled as just another family feud in the Gulf, the Gulf crisis of 2017 was more the result of a shifting regional balance of power, with the new regional centre of gravity no longer placed in North Africa or the Levant but on the shores of the Gulf. Qatar and the UAE were two small states whose influence within the vacuum of a retreating United States allowed them to punch above their weight. Their influence networks, comprising policymakers, journalists and think tanks, provided tools to advance their narratives not just in the region but also in western capitals. And while Qatar had to do little to win over liberal hearts and minds for the cause of the revolution, the UAE had to invest more subtly and broadly to win over conservatives and liberals and securitize the Arab Spring as a menace to regional security and stability.

While Qatar's rather idealistic narrative for regional liberalization was based on naïve optimism, the UAE's narrative was fear-based, resonating mostly in conservative circles who backed concerns over Islam and Islamism and who were willing to trade the prospect of a liberal regional order for the myth of authoritarian stability. Abu Dhabi had strategically invested in conservative think tanks to organize events that would label the Muslim Brotherhood as a 'terrorist organization' and supporters in Qatar and Turkey as 'sponsors of terrorism'.²¹ Since 2014 the UAE had ripened policymakers and think tankers in Washington, London and Brussels to securitize the Muslim Brotherhood – laying the foundation for a campaign that in 2017 expanded from its *Ikhwan* focus to one that would undermine Qatar's and Turkey's credibility while legitimizing the support for authoritarians such as Sisi in Egypt, Haftar in Libya and later even Assad in Syria. The idea of the 'Arab Winter' and the post-revolutionary chaos helped mobilize a counterrevolutionary camp that even encompassed illiberal liberals in the region and the west – namely self-proclaimed liberal journalists, academics and policymakers who grant liberal rights such as the freedom of expression to those who share a liberal worldview.²² Their rejection of Islam and Islamism on these grounds made them susceptible to the counterrevolutionary vision.

Although the Gulf rift appears to be healed at least on the surface, the ideological undercurrent of this divide remains. Under the surface remain mobilized communities, whose ideological predispositions and ontological worldviews appear to be irreconcilable.²³ The rift continues to polarize conflicts in Libya and Syria and to impact debates in the Gulf and Egypt. Events in Tunisia in July 2021 suggested that the clash over visions continues unabated. For months Tunisia had been in a state of political crisis, amid protests over police abuse and deteriorating standards of living. President Saïed then responded with unilateral action on 25 July 2021, suspending parliament and directly targeting the *Ennahda* movement – an Islamist party in the elected government. For months, nodes in the UAE's information network had been tending civil-societal discourse framing *Ennahda* as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood and solely responsible for the political crisis of the country. While mobilization against the movement was genuine, some in Tunisia at the time felt that the president's intervention was

²¹ Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard, 'Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation', *Oxford University Computational Propaganda Research Project, Working Paper*, 1 (2018), 66.

²² Claire Fox, 'The Dangers of Illiberal Liberalism', *The Economist*, 17 August 2018.

²³ Andreas Krieg, 'Qatar Blockade: The War of Narratives Is Far from Over', *Middle East Eye*, 6 January 2021.

a threat to the achievements of the revolution. Clashes between those who protest *Ennahda's* framing and those who support the actions of the president, meanwhile, continue.²⁴

There remains a clash over ideals and values in a region that lacks a legacy of individual liberty and security and where the rights of states and regimes have always superseded the rights of individuals. The main achievement of the revolutionaries was the nurturing of a new political culture in the Arab world that would challenge the old authoritarian status quo, empowering the individual over the regime and eroding the illusion of regime omnipotence. And while the revolutionary vision might have failed to radically change the regional status quo, it nonetheless fostered a new political culture that regimes will find hard to contain through repression alone. Even as the counterrevolutionary myth of authoritarian stability appears to dominate the political status quo in the region for now, the authoritarians live in fear of civil-societal mobilization carried by a revolutionary narrative. Both sides have been able to mobilize support that polarizes the region and has created a fault line that is as much subject to identity politics as the old sectarian divide between Sunnis and Shias. The perception of one's own position vis-à-vis the Arab Spring and its revolutions continues to matter, dividing the region into revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries. Especially when the identity of a state is tied to one vision or the other – as is the case with Qatar and the UAE, on opposite ends of the spectrum – the two ideological positions become irreconcilable.²⁵

CONCLUSION

In a region where vision is more important than strategy, narratives matter. Especially at a time of uncertainty amid the transition from the pre- to a post-revolutionary order in the Arab world after the Arab Spring, ideological visions provide at least a sense of certainty and stability. As the centre of gravity of the region shifted from North Africa and the Levant to the Gulf, it was the visions of the most proactive players in the region during and after the revolutions that shaped the discourse on the Arab Spring. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates – ideologically diametrically opposed in their perception of the events that led to the downfall of the old regional order – disproportionately shaped the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary visions, respectively. Their narratives of how to reconstitute a new regional order – one through socio-political pluralism and inclusive governance, and one through authoritarian stability – supported the regional mobilization and demobilization of civil society.

While the two respective visions have certainly become closely linked to national identities in the case of Qatar and the UAE, they have mobilized the wider regional public sphere in what is not a top-down relationship between sponsor and surrogate, but one much more based on flat hierarchies where likeminded individuals and organizations flock together. Although the UAE in particular has invested strategically in ripening networks, much of the civil-societal mobilization that occurred across the region after the revolutions was coincidental.²⁶ Thereby, the revolutionary vision and narratives have shaped identities among individuals and communities

²⁴ Reuters, 'Tunisian President Denies a Coup but Holds Power Tight', *Reuters*, 2 February 2022.

²⁵ David Roberts, 'Ontological Security and the Gulf Crisis', *Journal of Arabian Studies* 10:2 (2021), 231.

²⁶ Andreas Krieg, *Subversion: The Weaponization of Narratives* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2022), Chapter 6.

who continue to strongly believe in the ideals of the revolutions. Likewise, the counterrevolutionary vision and its narratives – albeit not framed as such – have shaped identities among those who take a zero-tolerance approach to Islamism in the region. Even illiberal liberals who once supported the ideals of the revolution were willing to sacrifice their values and visions to enable authoritarians to purge civil society of political Islam.

In the evolving post-revolutionary environment in the region, the polarization that occurs along these ideological fault lines disrupts discourse, civil-societal consensus and ultimately the relationship between governing and governed. It has become a source of protracted conflict in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria while already shaping discourse in many other Middle Eastern countries. It draws in influencers, journalists, academics and policymakers who, where permitted, take to the public sphere in what have become wars over narratives that are rooted in both ideology and identity politics. Nothing less than the future of regional security and stability appears to be at stake.

Beyond the region, this ideological standoff has drawn in external observers and influencers. At a time when western powers act in the region through partners and surrogates amid an apparent absence of a coherent strategy, the two visions appear to also influence how these western powers look on the region. In particular in the context of countering ‘terrorism’, which continues to mean different things to different policymakers, there is a clear division in Europe and the United States over the role political Islam is supposed to play in the post-revolutionary order. Regional synergies created between France and the UAE are a great example of how the Emirati vision is echoed by policymakers and government in Paris. This has contributed to a rift between France and its European partners and the United States over France’s support for the joint UAE and Russian policy to install the strongman Haftar in Libya, which has undermined an inclusive solution in the country.²⁷ The ripple effects of this ideological fault line are therefore no longer felt only in the information environment or academia, but have spilled into the physical domain of international policymaking.

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²⁷ Simeon Kerr, ‘UAE Minister Backs Macron on Muslim Integration’, *The Financial Times*, 2 November 2020.

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16. The political economies of the Arab Gulf states: policies for change, frameworks for stasis

Matthew Gray

INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding some economic, cultural, and other variations between them, the Arab states of the Gulf – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – form a distinct political-economic subregion within the Middle East and share many important characteristics. They are all conservative monarchies, with broadly similar patterns of political control and means of legitimacy-building. They share close cultural and linguistic similarities, including many family and tribal relationships that cross national boundaries. Overall, they are wealthier per capita than most other economies in the region, with their combined gross domestic product (GDP) amounting to around half the total of the entire Middle East GDP. This wealth, disproportionately derived from their oil and gas production, has permitted broad rises in incomes and rapid development, especially since the 1970s, but also has distorted labour markets, state-society dynamics and state-business relationships.

Hydrocarbons are, of course, a finite resource, and in fact as global energy dynamics shift, and the end of the oil age appears to come closer while changes in gas and petrochemicals also promise upheavals for producer states, there is increased urgency for economic and other reforms that will wean these economies off their reliance on energy rents. The Gulf states have responded to this imperative with national development strategies and other plans for economic diversification and for the generation of wealth and employment in the private sector. While ambitious, such goals are not new and have been pursued, typically with only limited success, in the past. The question is how much time remains for these economies to transition to post-hydrocarbon ones on their own terms and before they are forced to do so by changes at the global level. The latter process would likely be a far more traumatic one than the former.

This chapter examines this challenge through an examination of the political economy structures and dynamics of the six Arab monarchies of the Gulf. It seeks to do three things in the process. The first is to outline the past trajectories of these political economies, explaining how and why they have the profiles they do today. The second is to illuminate the pragmatic development challenges that now confront the Gulf states, and how they appear to be proposing to address these. Finally, the chapter will lay out a theoretical framework for understanding the nature of Gulf regimes and state-society and state-business relationships, by combining three specific explanations – rentierism (and more recently “late” rentierism), entrepreneurial state capitalism and economic statecraft and foreign policy activism – into a tripartite framework, arguing that these three mutually supportive dynamics have previously served to maintain extant regimes and political-economic structures. The chapter concludes by questioning whether this framework will continue to provide stability and regime durability into the future.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ARAB GULF STATES' POLITICAL ECONOMIES

The Arab states of the Gulf have undergone a massive transformation since around the middle of the twentieth century. In 1950 these states were relatively poor ones, living off seasonal pearling, fishing and other basic economic activities, in a few cases supplemented by trade. They were on the periphery of the global economy, with the modern oil era only just beginning, and they remained under the protection of the British, not yet independent states. By 2019 – thanks in substantial measure to their oil and gas production – they were almost unrecognizable from a couple of generations earlier. Their combined GDP was about US\$1.64 trillion, some 58 per cent of the total for the entire Arab world,¹ including some of the wealthiest countries in the world per capita. The subregion has seen a massive rise in disposable income and a boom in infrastructure spending, especially in the 1970s and again since the early 2000s. The Gulf is home to the world's tallest building, in Dubai; the world's busiest international airport, also in Dubai; and various high-profile events, from three Formula 1 races to a range of international film festivals, sporting fixtures and other major events.

Social change also has been substantial. The traditional societies of the Gulf were arranged around small nomadic populations, often migrating according to the seasons, and modest settlements. Although the area had long housed some important towns and even small cities, and its international role has been stronger than often assumed because of its geographic position and trade orientation, its economy was heavily based on traditional activities such as pearling, fishing, animal husbandry, some agriculture and trade, along with a modest manufacturing profile in areas such as boatbuilding and traditional crafts.² The major settlements, however, were modest: Dubai, arguably a global household name by the 2010s, probably had a population of only around 20,000 in 1950, and the first concrete block house was not constructed there until 1956.³ Political power was held by local families under a patriarchal ruler, often adopting elements of consultation into an otherwise quite hierarchical system. Later, beginning in 1820, the local shaykhs ceded certain powers to the British in a trucial system that gave the British freedom of navigation and trade in exchange for the shaykhs and their ruling families gaining demarcated territories and, in effect, British recognition and protection. These truces ultimately gave the British considerable political control in Gulf affairs and created the broad political units that would later form into the modern Gulf states.⁴

The socioeconomic transformation and modernization of the region came with oil. Almost immediately there were local economic effects: many people's livelihoods quickly became attached to the oil industry; oil revenues (even if initially modest) granted new cooptive capacity to existing ruling elites, often at the expense of merchants; and infrastructure was built and new class structures emerged as the industry developed.⁵ Oil wealth paid for an expansion of schools, medical services, transport infrastructure, militaries and other state services, but

¹ World Bank data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>.

² Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* (Dubai: Motivate, 2004 [1982]), 164–97.

³ Ibid, 247.

⁴ Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman* (Reading: Ithaca, 1998 [1989]), 14–17.

⁵ David Commins, *The Gulf States: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 162–3.

Table 16.1 *The growth of Gulf oil revenues, 1940–1980 (revenues, US\$ millions)*

	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980
Bahrain	1.0	3.3	15.0	35.0	253.6
Kuwait	–	11.0	365.0	895.0	17,246.0
Qatar	–	1.0	54.0	122.4	5,387.0
Saudi Arabia	2.5	57.0	355.0	1,200.0	102,372.0
United Arab Emirates	–	–	3.0	233.0	19,456.0

Source: From figures in Khaldoun Hasan al-Naqeeb, *Society and State in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula: A Different Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2012 [1990]), 81 (Table 5.4).

the allocative nature of oil revenues, especially the fact that they could replace the need for taxation, also solidified rulers' positions. Oil thus served as a catalyst for substantial change and yet also underwrote existing power structures.⁶ As shown in Table 16.1, the region saw a massive increase in oil income over the 1950s and 1960s, yet these would be dwarfed by the sums received in the oil booms after 1973.

The oil boom that began in 1973 was a transformational event both in terms of its impact on Gulf development and in raising the region's global profile. In response to the 1973 Arab–Israeli war and to western, especially US, support for Israel, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) placed an embargo on sales to the US, as well as cutting production. In a matter of months, oil prices roughly quadrupled, from US\$2.90/bbl in mid-1973 to US\$11.65 by the end of the year.⁷ Prices increased again in 1979 and 1980, after the 1978–9 Iranian revolution and then the start of the 1980–8 Iran–Iraq War, peaking at US\$36.83 in 1980. There were obvious development benefits from this tremendous injection of rents, but also less positive impacts.⁸ Oil wealth funded immense new capital spending, transfers to the public and public sector consumption, with flow-on to the private sector through state contracts and to the population through transfers and generous state employment. However, it also deepened the Gulf's reliance on oil income, deterring states from establishing or expanding a taxation arrangement with society and instead funding greater cooptive and repressive capabilities. Oil generated much higher employment in the public sector, bloating bureaucracies and bringing additional power to state-owned enterprises (SOEs), while also undermining the size and efficiency of the private sector. The Gulf's reliance on foreign workers, both skilled and, in the largest numbers, unskilled and semi-skilled, grew markedly, discouraging firms and citizens from developing the skills of the indigenous workforce. Further, a good amount of the oil income was squandered on military spending and 'white elephant' projects or simply lost through corruption or inefficiency, and arguably democratic impulses were also constrained or even suppressed.⁹

Furthermore, the oil boom ended in a bust – a bust that lasted, broadly, for some two decades, from the early 1980s until the early 2000s. From a high in 1980 of US\$36.83/bbl, prices fell to US\$14.43/bbl in 1986 and remained below the US\$20 mark for all but 3 of the

⁶ Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States*, 23–4.

⁷ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 625.

⁸ Matthew Gray, *The Economy of the Gulf States* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda, 2019), 47–52.

⁹ Suzanne Maloney, 'The Gulf's Renewed Oil Wealth: Getting It Right this Time?' *Survival* 50:6 (2008): 130–1, 138–9.

subsequent 14 years. Essentially, 'the Middle East's fortunes collapsed with the price of oil',¹⁰ as per capita income dropped, state spending was sharply reduced and economic confidence fell. The 1980s were also a more challenging time for regional politics, between the 1978–9 Iranian revolution, the 1980–8 Iran–Iraq war, the Soviet war in Afghanistan, US–Iran tensions and the 1990–1 Gulf war. The period highlighted a paradox of Gulf political economy: when oil prices are high, economic reform and diversification, though often promised, is usually shelved because of a lack of immediate pressure for it; however, later, when oil prices fall and reform is needed, the funds are no longer available to support and cushion such policies.

The imperatives for reform grew stronger after 1991. Not only did oil prices remain low and budgets strained and in the red, but changes in the global environment, especially the end of the Cold War, ushered in a period that was a high point for economic liberalism. The 1990s also began a period of globalization, characterized by the emergence of new technologies and cheaper transport, and a rise in international trade and investment. While these held some risks for the conservative leaderships of the region, they also offered the promise of new and easier means by which to diversify their economies, generate employment and expand, albeit on their own terms, the scope and size of the private sector.¹¹ The 1990–1 Gulf war had also been a reminder to the Gulf leaderships of their vulnerability to larger states such as Iraq, which pushed them closer to the US as well as prompting them to rearrange – but not abandon or even fundamentally alter – the allocative strategy they had developed for using (part of) their oil wealth for regime maintenance and consolidation.

Their strategy, however, was not to pursue unchecked neoliberal reforms, which posed the risk of stoking popular opposition and undermining the allocative structures underwriting the state-society-society relationship. Thus, reforms that were typical in neoliberal experiments elsewhere – exchange rate liberalization, labour market reforms, privatizations and suchlike – were generally eschewed. Instead, they undertook careful and selected, but still substantial, economic and commercial reforms. The private sector was given a wider scope in which to operate, and foreign investment invited into certain parts of the economy: 'strategic' industries such as oil, gas, petrochemicals, defence, security, telecommunications and the like remained largely in state hands and off limits to the private sector, but in most other areas the domestic and foreign private sector was encouraged to play a greater role. Commercial processes were made simpler, access to finance eased and free trade zones were created or expanded, and in these the private sector was typically given tremendous latitude.¹²

Similar reforms followed in the twenty-first century. Although the aftermath of events such as the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US and the 2003 Iraq war had significant, often negative, impacts on the Gulf states, the boom in oil prices that began around 2003 and 2004 both signalled the end of the two-decade-long era of low prices that had hobbled the region since the mid-1980s and, crucially, provided a cushion for further economic reforms and the funds for new infrastructure and other investment to support efforts at economic diversification, employment creation, and closer integration into the world economy. Oil wealth

¹⁰ Mahmoud A. El-Gamal and Amy Myers Jaffe, *Oil, Dollars, Debt, and Crises: The Global Curse of Black Gold* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 34.

¹¹ On these points see Ali Sadik, 'The Economic Implications of Globalization for the GCC Countries', in *Globalization and the Middle East: Islam, Economy, Society and Politics*, eds Toby Dodge and Richard Higgott (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2002), 83–112.

¹² Gray, *The Economy of the Gulf States*, 57–9.

was spent far more thoughtfully and carefully in this third oil boom than it had been in the first two, over the period 1973–83: the rate of oil revenue that was saved was almost double that in the earlier booms, spurring economic output and providing for massive new investments across all the six Gulf monarchies.¹³ The Gulf states became much larger investors in the wider Arab world, and as their economic reforms attracted new investment they also garnered much greater inward investment, with total inflows rising from US\$2 billion in 2001 to US\$60 billion in 2008.¹⁴ After the hesitant and often poorly targeted diversification strategies of earlier decades, the Gulf states in the 2000s began spending far greater sums on industrialization, including in downstream energy, manufacturing, smelting and construction materials.¹⁵

Yet the 2004–8 oil boom was not without its downsides: inflation rose sharply, reaching double digits in some states at the peak of the boom; budgetary processes were usually not improved, and in fact states often became reliant on higher oil prices than previously; and defence spending remained very high by global levels.¹⁶ Little was done to reduce the Gulf's reliance on foreign workers, which had expanded massively after the 1970s and in most cases continued to do so through the third oil boom as well; only Oman began to seriously address it in the 2000s and 2010s.¹⁷ Indeed, this remains a major hurdle to economic diversification and for the growth of the indigenous private sector, but with public sector employment a core element of the state's economic paternalism, reducing its size, or even actively encouraging people into the private sector instead, was politically hazardous. For similar reasons, little was done to expand the state's tax base or reduce subsidies during the 2000s boom, even though these, too, were pressing economic problems: one source calculated that in 2010 Gulf states spent an incredible US\$89.8 billion on subsidies – funds that were diverted from other purposes, encouraged inefficient consumption and represented an opportunity cost where the subsidies were from oil or gas not otherwise exported.¹⁸ Only later, in the second half of the 2010s and with the pressure of sustained low oil prices, did states finally act to lower or eliminate subsidies¹⁹ and, to a much lesser extent, introduce some modest new taxes.

By the end of the 2010s, therefore, the Gulf states had undergone a remarkable transformation in many ways, while in others they remained hobbled by the past and by oil-induced structural impediments. On the surface, the cities of the Gulf sparkled with new buildings, malls, roadways and cultural sites. As Table 16.2 shows, today they have many of the socio-economic indicators to match this developed appearance, with GDP, unemployment, literacy and other measures comparing favourably to those of other developed economies. At the same time, undergirding this transformation are traditional political and social structures that set the region apart from, say, the OECD economies. They are ruled at their summit by monarchs:

¹³ Aasim M. Husain, 'IMF Survey: Riding the Crest of the Oil Boom', *IMF News* (Washington: International Monetary Fund, 2007).

¹⁴ Fred H. Lawson, 'The Persian Gulf in the Contemporary International Economy', in *The Political Economy of the Persian Gulf*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (London: Hurst, 2012), 20–1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22–5.

¹⁶ Robert Springborg, *Political Economies of the Middle East and North Africa* (London: Polity, 2020), 112–14, 123–4; Gray, *The Economy of the Gulf States*, 63–4.

¹⁷ Gray, *The Economy of the Gulf States*, 14 (Table 1.2), 50 (Table 2.3), 150–3.

¹⁸ Raphael Espinoza et al., *The Macroeconomics of the Arab States of the Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 71 (Table 4.1), 72.

¹⁹ Glada Lahn, 'Fuel, Food and Utilities Price Reforms in the GCC: A Wake-Up Call for Business,' *Chatham House Research Paper* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2016).

Table 16.2 Gulf states: key indicators, 2019 (or latest)

	GDP per capita (US\$)	GDP growth rate (%)	Inflation rate (%)	Unemployment rate (%)	Resource rents (% GDP)	Adult literacy rate (%)	Health spending (% GDP)	HDI ranking (2020)	Ease of Business ranking
Bahrain	\$23,443	2.0	1.0	1.56	3.8	97.5	4.1	42	43
Kuwait	\$32,373	0.4	1.1	2.41	42.7	96.1	5.0	64	83
Oman	\$15,343	-0.8	0.1	1.84	26.7	95.7	4.1	60	68
Qatar	\$62,088	0.8	-0.7	0.12	20.7	93.5	2.5	45	77
Saudi Arabia	\$23,140	0.3	-2.1	6.13	24.8	95.3	6.4	40	62
United Arab Emirates	\$43,103	1.7	-1.9	2.28	16.8	93.2	4.2	31	16

Sources: Various files in *World Bank Open Data*, <https://data.worldbank.org/> (accessed 10 August 2021); 'Latest Human Development Index Ranking' page, *United Nations Development Programme Human Development Reports*, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking> (accessed 19 August 2021); and 'Ease of Doing Business rankings' page, *World Bank Group Doing Business*, www.doingbusiness.org/en/rankings (accessed 19 August 2021).

not truly absolute ones, despite the common description of them as such, but nonetheless ones with highly centralized power under the ruler, who in turn typically has a small and often opaque coterie of elites around him. Institutions and legal-rational state processes routinely take second place behind the politics of personality and the connections between families, tribes and other basic social groupings. States and societies speak to each other, certainly – in contrast with what earlier rentier theorists suggested – but they do so through social networks, elite connections, mass media and other means rather than at the ballot box, and rarely through civil society organizations. States and business likewise communicate too, but again through mechanisms different from those to be found in most other economies that are home to such wealth and the features of contemporary development. Given all this, how are the structures and dynamics of the Arab Gulf economies best explained?

A THREE-PRONGED FRAMEWORK FOR THE GULF POLITICAL ECONOMIES

The Gulf contains many unique elements, in its political economy as in so many other respects. Although there has long been contention among scholars about how best to explain its political-economic dynamics, not least after rentier state theory first emerged, the argument herein is that a combination of three main theoretical explanations can, in combination, illuminate the nature of Gulf states and the regimes that control them, their relationship with their societies, and to a large extent their external orientations and foreign policies as well. These are ‘late rentierism’, ‘entrepreneurial state capitalism’ and economic statecraft. This tripartite approach also provides insights into the sources of, and the prospects for, their development strategies, with implications for the future of these states and their political economies.

The late rentierism concept is derived from the earlier rentier state theory (RST), which was developed to explain the nature of the state-society relationship in oil-rich political economies. Rent refers here to income that is externally derived and largely unproductively earned; in other words, income gained from an inherent natural feature of a territory, and not (primarily) from productive economic activity. Oil and gas revenues are probably the most obvious and most valuable form of rent. RST emerged because scholars noted that states which received large rent incomes would typically distribute some of this money to society, in the forms of services, subsidies, public sector jobs and an absence of taxation, rather than by imposing taxes on the population and then redistributing that money, as in non-rentier systems. In effect, rentier theorists argued, rulers would use rent income to buy the acquiescence of society, along with a repressive capability if required, and thus did not have to make the same democratic or accountability concessions to society as they might otherwise have to do. The Gulf states, from the early oil era onwards and especially once the first oil boom began in the early 1970s, were illustrative. In all six Arab Gulf monarchies there was an absence or near-absence of taxation; very high levels of public sector employment, with foreign workers providing the bulk of the private sector labour force and also doing most of the less pleasant jobs; large public works programmes; transfer payments and subsidies, and free health care and education.²⁰ Noting this, the RST concept was developed to describe these states as ‘allocation’ (rentier) states

²⁰ Khaldoun Hasan al-Naqeeb, *Society and State in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula: A Different Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1990), 85–90.

rather than 'production' (taxing and redistributive) ones, and to explain the absence of democracy or other accountability processes.²¹

However, while the original RST contained considerable merit, over time it became evident that it was excessively simplistic. It over-reached in seeking to serve as a comprehensive explanation for the structure of the state. The basic rentier pattern was valid, and remains so, but it became increasingly nuanced and sophisticated. The idea of 'late' rentierism sought to retain the basic concept but also refine it.²² It continues the idea that rents allow a regime to avoid democratic concessions, but argues that leaders nonetheless have to be responsive to society, albeit to varying extents: the history of the emergence of the Al Sabah dynasty in Kuwait, for example, and its inability to fully protect Kuwaitis from external threats created a very different dynamic to, say, that of Saudi Arabia, where the Al Saud regime sought to nation-build across a conglomerated society. All six of the Arab Gulf monarchies seek to build their legitimacy and popular support, including by being seen as long-term in their thinking and capable in their statecraft – something that the early RST theorists erroneously denied was the case. In fact, these states *all* now have clear and long-term development strategies (more on which shortly), with policies to promote growth, confidence and international linkages. Rents do not define the very nature of the state in the Gulf, and are merely a political tool, but nonetheless are absolutely core to explaining the behaviour of the Gulf states and the elites at their summits.

A second explanation for the political economies of the Gulf states, which ties in to late rentierism, is state capitalism, and specifically what may be called 'new' or 'entrepreneurial' state capitalism. Broadly, state capitalism refers to a system in which the state is an extensive or disproportionate owner in an economy, and acts to regulate and control it, while also (largely) allowing the basic mechanisms of supply and demand to determine the price and allocation of goods and services. Beyond this, there is a lack of consensus on the concept's precise application. It has been applied to analyses of various mercantilist powers, to centrally planned economies such as the Soviet Union and Maoist China and also to mixed economies with strong, interventionist states such as post-independence India, modern Turkey, Mexico, Brazil and many others.²³ In the Middle East, the term has often been associated with Nasser's and Sadat's Egypt and other Arab republics such as post-independence Iraq, Syria and Algeria, among several. In these older state capitalist systems the state tried to seize areas of the economy controlled by foreign interests, tightly control the indigenous private sector and bring about social change and increase class mobility. In so doing, the state was serving specific class interests, with these political motivations often prioritized over economic and commercial ones.

In the Gulf states in the twenty-first century, a very different form of state capitalism is being practised. The state is a major owner in the economy, and regulates parts of it, often strictly, while also letting market forces set most prices. In this sense they meet the basic

²¹ Giacomo Luciani, 'Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework', in *The Arab State*, ed. Giacomo Luciani (London: Routledge, 1990), 65–84.

²² Matthew Gray, 'A Theory of "Late Rentierism" in the Arab States of the Gulf', *Center for International and Regional Studies Occasional Paper No. 7* (Doha: Center for International and Regional Studies, 2011).

²³ For more on this varied usage of the term, see Ian Bremmer, *The End of the Free Market: Who Wins the War Between States and Corporations?* (New York: Portfolio, 2010), particularly 29–54.

definition of state capitalism. Yet these states give much greater leeway to the private sector, at least in certain industries. They seek out foreign investment (if, again, only in some areas), and in principle see foreign investment as a positive for the economy. They encourage state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to be efficient and profitable, and often push them to expand into the international arena. In this, the Gulf states act in ways similar to a range of other, varied economies: a similar approach to state capitalism is found in economies as diverse as, among others, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, South Africa, China since the 1990s, and even Russia.²⁴ Such states and leaderships are no longer driven by distributive justice or ideological concerns to any great extent, and instead use their control of the commanding heights of these economies to serve their own political ends by expanding the economic reach of the state and ultimately its legitimacy and durability. The Gulf states have undertaken a form of state capitalism for a long time, but they have been notably active, long-term and risk-tolerant in the way they have conducted their state capitalism since the 1990s or early 2000s, globalizing their SOEs, giving state capitalists enormous autonomy to operate their SOEs efficiently and profitably and building new industries both themselves and with foreign partners.²⁵ All this arguably makes the more specific tag of ‘entrepreneurial state capitalism’ suitable to the contemporary Gulf states²⁶ (and perhaps a small number of others, although not all new state capitalist examples constitute the entrepreneurial form).

Finally, the contemporary Gulf states have broadly, if to varying extents and in specific ways, adopted activist policies towards the outside world, and use what may be termed ‘economic statecraft’²⁷ as a tool for economic engagement, business development, the pursuit of national security and, ultimately, regime maintenance. The exact policies and tactics have varied, but typically have encompassed several of the following: strategically considered outward investments; inward and outward joint venture projects; foreign aid disbursements; the hosting of international sporting and cultural events; active tourism promotion strategies; and even mass media and other public relations outreach. Several of the Gulf states have added a national ‘branding’²⁸ strategy too, seeking to construct a positive image or association with the country overseas and reinforcing it in the minds of people at home. These dynamics may also be linked into foreign policy decisions, for example if an investment decision abroad is prompted both by economic ambitions and a desire to deepen economic engagement with another important state. The Gulf states have, most obviously, sought to invest in the United States and at the same time enhance security cooperation with Washington, but some Gulf investments in economies from Iran to Turkey to Egypt have been made with security and commercial goals in mind. In its multitude of specific forms, economic statecraft gives leaderships the chance to manage their external relationships, and in turn to develop their economies and gain further societal support, by linking economic and diplomatic goals and using this

²⁴ See the examples in *ibid.*, 85–145.

²⁵ For examples see Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring* (London: Hurst, 2014), 86–90; Gray, *Qatar*, 64–74.

²⁶ Gray, ‘A Theory of “Late Rentierism”’, 34–5; Matthew Gray, *Qatar: Politics and the Challenges of Development* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2013), 10–11.

²⁷ Gray, *The Economy of the Gulf States*, 5, 19–20, 60; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis* (London: Hurst, 2020), 168–75, 177–207 *passim*.

²⁸ This idea has been discussed extensively by scholars, but an early, quality work on it is J.E. Peterson, ‘Qatar and the World: Branding for a Micro-State’, *The Middle East Journal* 60:4 (Autumn 2006): 732–48.

to enhance domestic political support. Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have been the most active adopters of economic statecraft strategies, but all of the Gulf monarchies have engaged in them to some extent in the past decade or two.

Oil and gas are, then, crucial to the nature of the Gulf's political economies and to any cogent explanation for them, as oil and gas wealth is central to all three of these explanations. It provides the regular financial inflows to the state that are needed to fund the rentier system, as well as the investment needed for entrepreneurial state capitalism (or any variant of state capitalism) to develop and function successfully. New or entrepreneurial state capitalism helps compensate for weaknesses in rentier systems, especially by providing an avenue for the co-optation of elites; state capitalists can be given a degree of freedom, and it may appear as though they are operating outside of normal political processes, but the state nonetheless retains strong control over them. State capitalism also holds the promise of levelling out economic performance and growth over the longer term. Rents are notoriously variable and unpredictable, meaning that rent income fluctuates, sometimes very abruptly: successful entrepreneurial state capitalism can broaden the economic base and provide a more stable base of (non-tax) revenue for the state. Economic statecraft relies on rentierism for much of its funding, and the political support or submission purchased by rentierism is often useful in ensuring popular acquiescence to economic statecraft spending. Done well, however, it helps bring greater security to the political-economic system, and thus more stability and durability to the state and regime. By developing new commercial links, attracting investment and creating a favourable view of the country abroad, and leveraging these both abroad and among the population at home, the state can send a message of international integration and long-term development thinking. When tied in with the state's strategic and defence imperatives, it provides an added layer of potential national security in a neighbourhood that is at times unstable and where several of the states under examination are very small but very wealthy per capita.

The relative focus and importance of these three dynamics varies to some extent across the Arab Gulf states: some states are more rentier than others, some more activist in their statecraft; some have more or fewer world-class, globalized SOEs than others. The effectiveness of these dynamics as political survival and legitimization strategies varies, too: the most rentier state may not be the most popular or legitimate, nor the most activist one the most secure. And this tripartite structure and explanation does not by necessity preclude other dynamics from being present. Society still has some agency; religious or other elites outside of the political economy remain important; and civil society or other groups still have some input into policymaking. On occasion, such actors or forces play a pivotal role in a policy decision. However, society and the actors within it have clear, state-imposed 'red lines' about which sorts of political activity are acceptable and which are not, and ultimately it is the combination of late rentierism, entrepreneurial state capitalism and economic statecraft that provides the overarching framework for explaining the Arab Gulf states' political economies.

ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

With the above context and framework in mind, the current political economy approaches and development strategies of the Arab Gulf states make more sense and, arguably, their prospects of success become clearer. These states face a political quandary: they preside over wealthy economies and societies that have been remarkably transformed by energy rents, and that same

wealth has underwritten, and arguably even driven, past regime survival and legitimization strategies; yet the limited time remaining in the oil age – and arguably in the gas era as well – makes it essential for these regimes to reform the very systems that have helped ensure their rule up to this point.

All the Arab Gulf states have strategic development plans in place and have done so for a long time now.²⁹ These include, as examples, the UAE's *Strategy for the Future*, Qatar's *National Vision 2030*, the *New Kuwait 2035: Kuwait National Development Plan* and perhaps the most ambitious and best-known one, Saudi Arabia's *Vision 2030*. There are others for Bahrain and Oman too, and for cities within these states, such as the *Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030*, plus strategies for particular goals or initiatives, such as the *UAE Green Growth Strategy*. Such development plans are not a new phenomenon: Saudi Arabia had a state-led economic diversification goal beginning with its first five-year plan, covering 1970–5, and in the two subsequent ones;³⁰ and specific development strategies in the other Gulf states typically date to the 1990s or the early 2000s. This is not coincidental, since the 1990s fell in the middle of a period of sustained low oil prices, in which the Gulf's economies, and state budgets, were severely stretched and the need for economic diversification and employment generation outside of the energy sector became starkly clear. Again, now, in the late 2010s and into the 2020s, the Gulf has placed renewed focus on these strategies and made them even more ambitious, arguably because of the especially challenging environment at present, resulting from low oil prices since 2014, weak economic performance thereafter, and then the coronavirus pandemic beginning in early 2020.³¹

There are some similarities across all these plans. Broadly, they all focus on, in order: first, diversifying the value they extract from oil and gas, for example by expanding upstream and downstream activities; second, expanding and developing sectors in which they already have some capability and have previously had some success; and finally, developing new areas of the economy, especially those with a high value-added element and/or which generate large amounts of employment.³² There is a strong case to be made that refining, petrochemicals, ports and shipping and other services related to hydrocarbons are natural areas in which to look for new economic opportunities. There are certain other industries that have been especially attractive: most Gulf states have sought to develop their airlines, tourism industry, banking and higher education industries, as examples. The strategies have also focused on emerging industries such as information and communications technology, green technologies and cutting-edge logistics and business services. Here, as areas still at an early stage of development globally, the prospects arguably are less clear, despite considerable resources often being put into these areas through the entrepreneurial state capitalism structure that characterizes the region. It is likely to help that these goals have been built into national development strategies,

²⁹ Martin Hvidt, 'Planning for Development in the GCC States: A Content Analysis of Current Development Plans', *Journal of Arabian Studies* 2:2 (2012): 1–19; Martin Hvidt, 'Development Plans and Visions in the Arab Gulf Countries: What Is the Likelihood that They Will Be Implemented?' *Center for Mellemøststudier News Analysis* (Odense: University of Southern Denmark, 2019).

³⁰ Tim Niblock with Monica Malik, *The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 58–9.

³¹ Nader Kabbani and Nejla Ben Mimoune, 'Economic Diversification in the Gulf: Time to Redouble Efforts', *Brookings Doha Center Policy Briefing* (Doha: Brookings Doha Center, January 2021), 1.

³² Hvidt, 'Development Plans and Visions', 3.

and that some of the steps needed to encourage a greater private sector role are a part of the approach.³³

The Saudi *Vision 2030*, announced and driven by the powerful crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman, is a case of a particularly ambitious development approach. While *Vision 2030* is a strategic framework along similar lines to other Gulf states, with a focus on economic diversification, the improvement of state services and infrastructure, the creation of new industries and investment promotion, it is ambitious in several key respects. It links economic goals to social and nation-building ones, envisioning a more liberal environment for business and in many social aspects, especially the roles played by women and the expansion of culture, entertainment and heritage. It also places obligations on the state not only to move the economy away from oil, but also to become more efficient and more accessible online. Very ambitiously, it linked to the proposed sale of a small part of the national oil company, Saudi Aramco. Originally, Muhammad bin Salman proposed selling 5 per cent of the firm, but the sale in December 2019 was of only 1.5 per cent.³⁴ That still raised some US\$25.6 billion, making it the largest initial public offering in history and valuing the company at over US\$1.7 trillion in total.³⁵ The funds raised are to be managed by the state's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), investing in various non-energy projects, including flagship state megaprojects such as Neom and Amwala, two planned cities that will focus on tourism, technology and other emerging industries³⁶ and which are integral to the crown prince's plans for economic diversification and employment creation.

Saudi Arabia's *Vision 2030* is especially ambitious in its scope and its links to goals such as privatization and social liberalization, but in their own ways the Gulf development strategies all have ambitious elements. Some set high aspirations for specific industries or outcomes, say in the environmental realm or in the development of cutting-edge technology. Others have an especially strong focus on job creation or attracting foreign investment. Some are more vague, aspirational documents, but important nonetheless for their articulation of a longer-term goal and for their ability to potentially focus state energies and resources more effectively than in the past. But will these plans work, and will they be sufficient to help the Gulf surmount the challenges that are likely to arise in the next couple of decades?

This is a critical question. Such strategic plans have been a feature for some time, but pressures on the global oil and gas sector and the debates around climate change are uniquely strong and pressing in the 2020s. Coupled with relatively low oil prices, there is perhaps stronger impetus for more substantial reforms now than was the case in the past. There is some scope for economic diversification, especially in more established industries such as tourism, finance, transport, and even health and education. It remains unclear, however, whether the Gulf states can build a critical level of expertise and economies of scale, especially in the cutting-edge technologies they seem to favour, and, if so, whether they can develop their indigenous labour market to maximize the potential from this. Business still typically

³³ Kabbani and Ben Mimoune, 'Economic Diversification in the Gulf', 6–7.

³⁴ 'Saudi Aramco Raises \$25.6bn in World's Biggest Share Sale', *BBC News*, 6 December 2019. www.bbc.com/news/business-50681159.

³⁵ 'Saudi Arabia: Deft Manoeuvres Help Aramco Break Valuation Records', *Gulf States Newsletter*, Iss. 1094, 13 December 2019.

³⁶ Jean-François Seznec, 'After Aramco IPO, Saudi Arabia Hopes to Create an Investor-Friendly Economy', *Brink*, 16 February 2020.

seeks safer investments and contracts than are found in areas such as emerging technologies, and citizens often prefer the security and prestige of state employment over a riskier, more demanding career in the private sector.

CONCLUSION

There are three key issues lingering over the political economies of the Gulf, which will shape reform outcomes and the future of the state–society relationship.

The first is that, whether in their strategic plans or elsewhere, the Gulf leaderships have largely eschewed several deeper reforms that remain essential if these economies are to truly transition into diversified ones.³⁷ They need far broader and more substantial tax bases than they currently possess, yet this is near impossible under the existing late rentier ‘bargain’ that exchanges economic largesse and state economic paternalism for political acquiescence by society. Deeper labour market reforms are needed as well, including an end (or dramatic alteration) to the dual citizen–expatriate market that now exists. Labour mobility and skills among citizens need to be further developed, whether through a better use of foreign expertise and labour or by a more serious development of citizen labour skills.³⁸ Again, however, rentierism inhibits such reform, as citizens have come to expect state jobs and employment security as part of the rentier arrangement. Yet such reforms are essential if the region is to lift efficiency and ensure its global competitiveness, and thus essential to any genuine and complete transformation away from the current oil-driven nature of these economies.³⁹

Second, international relations and regional stability matter for the Gulf’s political economies, and there remain serious regional obstacles to development.⁴⁰ The Arab Gulf states’ relations with Iran are critical, as investors will be hesitant to partner long-term with states that face the risk of regional conflict. The behaviour of the Gulf states has come into question in recent years as well, especially the Saudi role in the Yemeni civil war, where it has been accused of amplifying a humanitarian disaster; and Muhammad bin Salman himself came under suspicion of involvement in the October 2018 assassination in Istanbul of Saudi journalist and opposition figure Jamal Khashoggi. The 2011 Arab Spring and the conflicts that followed in Syria, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere created uncertainty about the long-term state–society relationships in the region, and concerns over the judgement of the Saudi heir apparent, among other such issues, create yet more opacity about the future.

Finally, it is important to remember that the Gulf leaderships are seeking economic transformation, and to some extent social reform as well, but not substantial political reform. Their development strategies and other activities may genuinely be intended to have positive economic and financial results, but they are not a sign of any real political liberalization. In fact,

³⁷ Gray, *The Economy of the Gulf States*, 186–91.

³⁸ Michael Herb, ‘Labor Markets and Economic Diversification in the Gulf Rentiers’, in *POMEPS Studies 33: The Politics of Rentier States in the Gulf*, ed. Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) (Washington: Institute for Middle East Studies, George Washington University, 2019), 8–12.

³⁹ Martin Hvidt, ‘Economic and Institutional Reforms in the Arab Gulf Countries’, *The Middle East Journal* 65:1 (2011): 98.

⁴⁰ Hamid E. Ali and Nesreen N. Al-Anbar, ‘Oil Production, Innovation, and Politics in the Middle East’, in *Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh (London: Routledge, 2019), 187–9.

these states and elites are motivated by regime maintenance. A transition away from oil, for example, would need to be compensated for by the development of new industries and sources of wealth, and even if successful, oil and gas would presumably still provide substantial revenues for the foreseeable future. The state will not necessarily lose its power, or even much of its cooptive capacity – or that, at least, is the plan. The economic diversification strategies, similarly, are primarily state-led documents. The privatization of Saudi Aramco, for example, proposed the sale of only a small part of the company, in exchange for a massive pool of state-managed funds that could be invested into state-owned projects. The strategy was not about the state retreating from the economy, but the reverse: it was a partial privatization of a small proportion of a state asset, but for longer-term investment in the Kingdom's state capitalism. There are a great many imperatives for economic reform in the region, and the regular pronouncements about it from the region's leaders suggest that genuine economic reforms are likely to come in the years ahead. In the political sphere, however, stasis and regime maintenance are likely to be the focus of elites, even if it must come at some expense to the economy.

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17. Lebanon: politics as permanent crisis

Filippo Dionigi

INTRODUCTION

Lebanon is a small country of about six million people in a territory of about 10,000 square kilometres. It also has a large diaspora, estimated at around a million people.¹ Its territory is in the Levantine region of West Asia, delimited on its eastern side by a low and medium-height mountain system and on its western side by the Mediterranean Sea. On the north and eastern side, Lebanon shares its borders with Syria, whereas the south is delimited by the territory of Israel, which Lebanon does not officially recognize, and with which it is at war.²

When compared with the rest of the region, this state is unique in some ways and ordinary in others. One of the aspects that makes it stand out is the role of religious groups, including Christians and Muslims, in shaping its political structure. This reflects the demographic constitution of the country, made up of three main confessional orders: Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims, and Christians of different denominations.³

Another exceptional aspect is the degree of freedom and pluralism in this country. Although some important issues and limitations cannot be neglected, rarely in other Arab Middle Eastern countries do we find as many media outlets, associations, universities, political parties or civil society associations as in Lebanon. Also, as concerns questions of gender and LGBTQ rights, Lebanon is relatively freer compared to other Arab contexts, although traditional religious authorities constantly threaten this freedom.⁴ This is also reflected in the broader cultural environment of the country, which has a historical reputation for its publishing activities, cinema and music production, architecture, and the arts at large.⁵ The Lebanese political

¹ Paul Tabar and Andrew Denison, 'Diaspora Policies, Consular Services and Social Protection for Lebanese Citizens Abroad', in *Migration and Social Protection in Europe and Beyond (Volume 3): A Focus on Non-EU Sending States*, ed. Jean-Michel Lafleur and Daniela Vintila (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 200.

² The Lebanese-Syrian border is vaguely demarked. Furthermore, the southeast border of Lebanon faces the Golan Heights region of Syria, which has been occupied by Israel since 1967.

³ There are no official statistics on the size of each group. For further information see Rania Maktabi, 'The Lebanese Census of 1932 Revisited. Who Are the Lebanese?' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 26:2 (1999). Generally, the belief is that Muslims are slightly more than Christians and that Shia are slightly greater or equivalent in size to Sunni. Lebanon is also home to a sizable population of Druze, a religious cult connected with Islam and oriental mysticism. Notice also that all states in the Middle East host a diversity of ethnic and religious groups, what sets Lebanon apart is their size in demographic terms and most importantly their institutionalization in the political system.

⁴ John Nagle and Tamirace Fakhoury, *Resisting Sectarianism: Queer Activism in Postwar Lebanon* (London: ZED Books, 2022).

⁵ Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond*, Tauris World Cinema Series (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008); Natalie Shooter and Ernesto Chahoud, 'The Lebanese Music Experiment: Disco and Nightlife During the Civil War', in *Global Dance Cultures in the 1970s and 1980s: Disco Heterotopias*, ed. Flora Pitrolo and Marko Zubak (Cham: Springer International

system, furthermore, has a patchy record of democratic practices disrupted by war and twisted by sectarian powers, but is nevertheless competitive and institutionalized when compared with other Arab states.

Far from unique, however, is Lebanon's past and present history of crisis and conflict both within its society and with other regional actors. Lebanon is also institutionally weak; its government lacks control of territory; its infrastructure and services are faulty at best; and, most importantly, state authority and sovereignty have been challenged by domestic actors such as traditional family networks, local armed groups, and international actors including Syria, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia and western powers such as France and the USA. Corruption is also among the features that Lebanon shares with the rest of the region and is exacerbated by powerful patron–client relations affecting the state's authority.

The objective of this chapter is to offer introductory guidance on the puzzles that Lebanon raises as both an exceptional and an ordinary phenomenon in the regional scenario. The approach relies on a broad historical narrative⁶ interspersed with thematic considerations. It begins with an introduction to state formation and the 'golden age' of the country, asking whether the Lebanese confessional regime is a viable form of statehood. Then, it touches upon the civil war, considering the internal and external factors that caused it. The phase following the civil war is interpreted through the lenses of Lebanon's uneven reconstruction and the role of Syria, explaining how the politics of the one-third veto produce permanent political paralysis. A section is dedicated to the Arab uprisings and the possibility for the Lebanese to mobilize against political stagnation. Finally, the chapter presents the case study of Hezbollah and concludes by reflecting on the urgency of reforms for the country.

LEBANON'S MODERN FORMATION: AN UNVIALE STATE?

Lebanon, as a geographical expression, used to refer primarily to the mountainous region of the country (Mount Lebanon). It became an increasingly institutionalized entity through several phases, including an Emirate of Mount Lebanon (1523–1842) and, in the late phase of the Ottoman Empire, as a mutasarrifate (1861–1915), an entity with relative administrative autonomy from Istanbul which enjoyed the protection of France. With the Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 and more decisively at the San Remo Conference of 1920, Paris gained control of Syria and Lebanon. Greater Lebanon was established under the control of the French Mandate⁷ in 1920, but rather than being limited to the territory of Mount Lebanon, as initially planned, it also included the coastal cities of Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon and Tyre, as well as the more rural regions in the East and the South.⁸

Publishing, 2022); Antoine L. Lahoud, 'The Role of Cultural (Architecture) Factors in Forging Identity', *National Identities* 10:4 (2008).

⁶ The sources used for this historical reconstruction rely primarily on: Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto, 2007); Kamal S. Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Tom Najem, *Lebanon: The Politics of a Penetrated Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁷ The mandate system was a form of colonial administration but within a legal framework established by the League of Nations.

⁸ Traboulsi, *A History*, 88–109; Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions*, 169–81.

Since the time of the mutasarrifate, France conceived of Lebanon as a country primarily for Maronite Catholics to isolate them from the Muslim majority of the region, but eventually the formation of Greater Lebanon, which served the purpose of weakening the project of a Greater Syria (*bilād al-shām*), shifted the demographic balance to roughly equal proportions of Christians of various denominations⁹ and Muslims (both Shia and Sunni). The detachment of Lebanon from the project of Greater Syria was part of France's strategic interests and was opposed by Lebanese Sunni Muslims, who supported the idea of Greater Syria as opposed to a Christian Lebanon;¹⁰ it also had the effect of shifting the economic balance towards the coastal cities, favouring the development and wealth of trade and ports economies to the detriment of the eastern and southern agricultural areas.¹¹

Thus, deep contrasts are at the basis of Lebanon's state formation as a project engineered by colonialism and generating socio-political dynamics that brought together diverse groups under the Lebanese national identity. Notwithstanding the fact that Christian groups attempted to provide a historical justification for Lebanon, tracing its roots to the ancient history of Phoenicia, Trabulsi claims that in reality Lebanon's national identity was being forged at this point in history by French foreign policy and Christian Maronite elites.¹² Already in this phase of state formation, we can see the contours of the institutional system that characterizes Lebanese statehood. The constitution of 1926 established a bicameral parliamentary republic with a presidential executive. Government seats and administrative offices were distributed to specific sects to reflect the confessional structure of the society, and the senate was supposed to be the assembly in which sectarian interests were represented. Furthermore, the new constitution established the distinction between common public law, regulating public affairs, and personal status law, relating to interpersonal private matters. Personal status law was (and is today) under the authority of religious leaders regulating matters such as marriage, divorce or adoption, therefore giving a large amount of power to religious orders as opposed to civil authority and perpetuating the dominance of religious institutions over Lebanese society.¹³

This initial constitution remained the framework of Lebanese confessional politics. It established the principle that religious groups were brought together in the Lebanese system by a power-sharing agreement and that religious communities and their respective leaderships were to be immune from state authority when regulating their communal matters. A ratio of 6:5, which remained unchanged until the end of the civil war, was established to regulate the partition of offices and seats between, respectively, Christians and Muslims.

With independence in 1943, the constitution was slightly amended and established equality between citizens, but subjected them to their respective religious authorities; furthermore, the sectarian character of the system was preserved, if not reinforced. The parliament was turned into a single chamber and its composition, as well as that of the government and all other offices, was supposed to reflect confessional balances. Furthermore, in addition to the written constitution, a National Pact was informally agreed upon between Bishara al-Khoury and Riadh al-Solh, respectively the Maronite Christian and Sunni Muslim leaders, who then

⁹ The Christian communities of Lebanon include the Maronite Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic and reformed churches.

¹⁰ Najem, *Lebanon*, 10.

¹¹ Roger Owen, *Essays on the Crisis in Lebanon* (London: Ithaca Press, 1976).

¹² Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions*, 170–81; Traboulsi, *A History*, 88–92.

¹³ *A History*, 88–109; Najem, *Lebanon*, 9–10.

became the first president and first Prime Minister of Lebanon. The National Pact consolidated the confessionalization of Lebanese institutions and defined the country's identity ambiguously. It assigned the role of president to a Maronite, the office of prime minister to a Sunni Muslim, and the chair of parliament to a Shia Muslim. This remains the *de facto* principle of power-sharing in Lebanese politics. Furthermore, it defined Lebanon's identity as an Arab country open to assimilating western principles that are in its best interest.¹⁴

In the decades that followed independence, the Lebanese system held a precarious but functioning balance sustained by economic growth based on trade and financial economies that earned Lebanon the label of 'Switzerland of the Orient'.¹⁵ This, nevertheless, was to the benefit of only a small economic and political elite; other social groups, especially those dependent on agricultural and industrial activities or located away from urban centres, had much less to benefit from this phase. A group that was particularly affected by this situation was the Shia community, mostly in the south of the country, which was not adequately represented in the emerging economic and political system until the formation of the Movement of the Dispossessed in the 1960s.¹⁶

The sectarian system reinforced pre-existing patron–client relations between political elites and Lebanese society at large. The *zu'amā'* (the family leaders within each confessional group) provide some social and economic protection to lower social groups in exchange for political loyalty and the recognition of social prestige and authority. Their power was further consolidated by the creation of the confessional political system, and whenever the political system turned out to be inconvenient for their exercise of power, this produced a phase of crisis between the state and the *zu'amā'* or among them.

Among the most disadvantaged social groups, there were also increasing numbers of refugees arriving in Lebanon at different stages, including a large Armenian population, Palestinians from the 1948 Nakba (and several others from later crises), and Kurds, who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, not having protection from local elites and relegated to living in camps with minimal economic resources.¹⁷

This process also produced the formation of an opposition within the country in which the figure of Kamal Junblatt stood out, inspired by socialist principles and calling for major reforms including the abolition of sectarianism, greater social equality and closer ties to other Arab countries. The end of al-Khoury's presidency was followed by the presidency of Camille Cham'oun, who tilted Lebanon towards its western patrons, notwithstanding internal and regional pressure to take a pro-Arab stance against Israel and on the side of Nasser's Egypt's regional leadership. Such tensions were among the factors that led to the first internal armed conflict in Lebanon, the 1958 unrest, in which the opposition confronted Cham'oun's presidency and his western sympathies, calling for reforms and a pro-Arab foreign policy along the

¹⁴ Traboulsi, *A History*, 110–28; Najem, *Lebanon*, 9–10.

¹⁵ Traboulsi, *A History*, 93.

¹⁶ See below on the role of Musa al-Sadr in this respect.

¹⁷ Filippo Dionigi, 'Statehood and Refugees: Patterns of Integration and Segregation of Refugee Populations in Lebanon from a Comparative Perspective', *Middle East Law and Governance* 9:2 (2017): 113–46; Nicola Migliorino, *(Re)Constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-Cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis* (New York and London: Berghahn Books, 2008); Rex Brynen, 'The Politics of Exile: The Palestinians in Lebanon', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 3:3 (1990); Farah Kawtharani and Lokman Meho, 'The Kurdish Community in Lebanon', *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 19:1/2 (2005).

lines of Nasser's pan-Arabism. Eventually the insurrection was contained, also thanks to the intervention of the US military (its first direct intervention in the Middle East) upon the request of Cham'oun, who was replaced by the head of the army, Fou'ad Shehab.

Shehab's rule was supported by the leaders of the 1958 insurrection, including the Druze Junblatt and the Christian right-wing Phalanges (also known as *katā'eb*) of Bashir al-Jemayel. He formally adopted regional neutrality, but in reality leaned towards the Egyptian and Syrian regional camps. Under his presidency some reforms took place, mostly in fields such as education and social security, but there were no significant changes in the political structure, which retained overall Christian dominance and preserved its economic elites. Shehab was opposed by some of the pro-western Christian factions, who accused him of authoritarianism due to his political use of the intelligence and the military and feared a shift from a neoliberal economic model to socialism. He was replaced in 1964 by Charles Helou, who did not bring changes domestically but was deeply affected by regional developments. Economically, the situation was shocked by the crash of one of Lebanon's biggest banks, the Intra Bank, undermining trust in Lebanese financial institutions and ending its reputation as 'Switzerland of the Orient'.¹⁸ In the meantime, the Arab Cold War¹⁹ was having effects on Lebanon by polarizing the pro-Nasserite camp, calling for closer integration with Syria and Egypt, and the anti-Nasser groups supported by western states and the regional monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, with which Lebanon had strong economic and financial ties.

Importantly, the Palestinian question began to be a crucial issue for Lebanon (hosting tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees since the 1948 Nakba), especially as al-Fatah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) relocated part of their military camps to Lebanese territory after the 1967 Six-Day War. The early 1960s also saw the beginning of Shia mobilization, initiated by imam Musa al-Sadr, a charismatic religious scholar of Iranian origin with Lebanese ancestors. Al-Sadr promoted a social movement (the Movement of the Dispossessed) that gave voice to the Lebanese Shia community, especially in relation to its marginalized economic and political condition.²⁰ He contributed to the foundation of the main Shia political formation, AMAL.²¹

These developments all converged in an escalation of tensions within and across confessional groups and prompted the direct intervention or indirect support of the regional and global patrons of each of these groups. After a long process of state formation, primarily shaped by the colonial domination of Lebanon and then sustained by the local political elites, the Lebanese institutional system was at a crucial point, testing whether confessionalism as a polity could sustain the pressure coming from domestic and regional forces. As Michael Hudson presciently observed: 'Are the loads on this system increasing even faster than its capabilities? The evidence suggests that they are. [...] At the risk of underestimating Lebanese ingenuity, it must be concluded that the Republic's political future will be stormy.'²²

¹⁸ Traboulsi, *A History*, 150–3.

¹⁹ Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, 1958–1964: A Study of Ideology in Politics*, Chatham House Essays (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

²⁰ Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa Al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (London: Tauris, 1986).

²¹ AMAL means hope in Arabic but also stands for *Afwāj al-Muqāwama al-Lubnāniyya* ('the regiments of the Lebanese resistance').

²² Michael C. Hudson, *The Precarious Republic: Political Modernization in Lebanon* (New York: Random House, 1968), 330–1.

It was 1968 when Hudson formulated this assessment; seven years later the Lebanese state slipped into a 15-year-long civil war.

THE CIVIL WAR (1975–89): CONVERGING INTERNAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS

The complexity and duration of the events that concern the Lebanese civil war prevent an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon herein.²³ Yet, its importance and its long-lasting consequences require at least a glance at two main phases.

The conflict broke out as the confessional groups began to transfer their political grievances from the consumed and unchangeable sphere of Lebanese politics to direct military confrontation. Conventional historical reconstructions mark the beginning of the civil war on 13 April 1975, when the Phalanges attacked a bus of Palestinian refugees, prompting reactions from the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) and the PLO and escalating into a spiral of violence that ended the already weak state's institutional authority. Beirut was divided in two along the Green Line, with West Beirut under the control of Muslim groups and East Beirut as the Christian part of the city.

This first phase of the war (1975–82) also marks the beginning of two interventions, from Syria and Israel. Although Syria was ideologically closer to socialism and pan-Arabism, it was worried by the role of the PLO and its growing influence. It decided to 'extend a helping hand' to the Christian factions in Beirut and intervened directly in the conflict on their side upon the request of then-President Suleiman Franjiyeh.²⁴ Israel too was concerned with these developments and saw an opportunity to ally with the forces opposing the PLO in Lebanon. The Christian forces therefore benefited from the protection of both Syria and Israel; this protection was also directly guided by US foreign policy interests, at the time defined by Henry Kissinger.²⁵

In 1982 a new phase of the conflict began. Israel had already intervened in Lebanon in a previous operation in 1978, but in 1982 an even greater operation brought the Israeli army all the way to Beirut, causing a confrontation in the Lebanese capital. As a result, a year later, the PLO officially left Lebanon for Tunis, while a Multinational Force (MNF) formed by the USA, France and Italy was deployed to oversee the PLO withdrawal.

Before this, however, the conflict experienced some of its most horrific peaks of violence. On 14 September 1982 the Lebanese president and Christian militia leader Bashir al-Jemayel was killed in a bomb attack, and the Lebanese Forces (LF) retaliated by carrying out a three-day-long massacre, killing more than a thousand civilians in the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatila under the eyes of Israeli occupying forces and the regular Lebanese troops.²⁶

²³ For guidance on the historiography of the Lebanese civil war see Sune Haugbolle, 'The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War, Mass Violence & Resistance', *SciencesPo*, 25 October 2011.

²⁴ Traboulsi, *A History*, 201.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 359–400.

The role of the MNF, which was redeployed after the Sabra and Shatila Massacre, turned out to be more problematic than problem-solving, and it was seen as partisan rather than neutral. On 11 April 1982 the US Embassy in Beirut was targeted by a suicide bomber driving an explosive-laden truck, killing more than 60 persons; on 23 October the US and French barracks were targeted with a similar technique.²⁷ The suicide bombings were claimed by a shady group calling itself Islamic Jihad but later associated with Hezbollah (see the section below). A few months later the MNF withdrew, leaving behind a country devastated by an internationalized civil war characterized by ruthless massacres, disappearances of civilians, kidnappings, forced displacement and long-term devastation.

Things changed in 1983 with the striking of a Lebanese–Israeli peace agreement, primarily engineered by President Amin al-Jemayel (brother of the slain Bashir al-Jemayel) and the Israeli leadership. The accord was approved by the delegitimized and decimated Lebanese Parliament but ultimately never signed by al-Jemayel because of opposition to the pact coming from al-Asad. The collapse of the Israeli–Lebanese agreement saw the end of the Israeli protection of the LF, which became the target of its enemies in retaliation for the atrocities it had carried out. The LNM rebranded under the name National Salvation Front (NSF), becoming even more closely connected with the Syrian government.

With Israel on the back foot, the MNF withdrawal, and the Christian groups in increasing trouble, Syria made gains in the conflict, also aided by the Iran-backed Hezbollah, which was engaged in the war against Israel in the south as part of the Lebanese Resistance. Later, Israel withdrew to the southern part of Lebanon, below the line of the Litany River, where it occupied Lebanese territory until 2000 in alliance with a local Christian militia (South Lebanon Army) led by Sa'ad Haddad. Syria maintained its presence in Lebanon until 2005.

It was only at the end of 1989, with the end of the Cold War and a radically changing global geopolitical scenario, that the Lebanese factions agreed to meet in Saudi Arabia, to negotiate the Tā'ef Agreement that put an end to the civil war.

The debate on the causes of the civil war is still open. External causes²⁸ are often identified with the role of the Palestinian factions in Lebanon, which have exacerbated internal tensions and projected Lebanese affairs in the regional dynamics of the Arab–Israeli conflict. The Arab Cold War, that is, the regional dynamics of the Cold War system,²⁹ is also considered among the factors that have exacerbated internal Lebanese tensions, thus making Lebanese militias the pawns of regional powers. The civil war saw Lebanon become the terrain of convergence of several opposed ideological frameworks, including socialism, Islamism, local nationalism, pan-Arabism and capitalist neoliberalism.

However, the domestic causes of the conflict cannot be underestimated. Sectarianism is an obvious contender in explaining what may have ignited the war: with its essentialist assumptions about social and political identity and its rigid crystallization in the political system, it has generated enemy identities fighting over the meaning of Lebanon as a state and a nation, and eventually making Lebanon irreformable. Yet, this should not be overstated; much of the

²⁷ The attack on the US barracks killed 242 Marines, making it the largest loss for the Marine Corps in a single day since the Second World War; the attack on the French troops killed 58 soldiers.

²⁸ See for example Theodor Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation* (London: Centre for Lebanese Studies in association with I.B. Tauris, 1993); Farid El-Khazen, *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon, 1967–1976* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

²⁹ Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*.

fighting took place also within confessional groups and critics, for example from the Marxian scholarly tradition, suggest that the interplay between western capitalism and the traditional structures of kinship have created forms of class and inequality that also fed into the dynamics of war.³⁰

Overall, internal and external causes are not mutually exclusive and converge towards an explanation and memory of the conflict that should prevail over the collective amnesia and amnesty that is promoted by the Lebanese state.³¹ The undisputed reality remains that the Lebanese civil war caused around 1,000,000 casualties, destroyed Lebanese infrastructure and dealt an almost fatal blow to the Lebanese state as an institution.³² Most concerning is the fact that, although violence subsided and the war ended in 1989, much of the tensions that sustained the conflict, such as confessionalism, inequality, foreign interferences, opposing ideologies, conflicting views on the identity of Lebanon and the very warlords that fought the civil war, have survived and thrived in the decades after the end of the war.

RECONSTRUCTION AND THE POLITICS OF THE ONE-THIRD VETO AFTER 1989

In a phase of major global developments that saw the end of the Cold War, Lebanon put an end to its 15-year-long conflict with the Tā'ef Agreement of 1989. The agreement produced a slight adjustment in the representative quotas of religious groups in the political system, making the Christian representation equal to the Muslim group in the parliament. The role of the president was revised to attribute greater executive power to the Prime Minister. The Agreement also called for the end of political confessionalism, although this was not implemented.³³ Furthermore, it imposed the disarmament of armed groups, but Hezbollah was allowed to keep its weapons to preserve its role as an anti-Israeli force in south Lebanon. Finally, the parliament issued a general amnesty in 1992, excluding the Palestinians, for all crimes related to the war, allowing warlords and their militia to retain a leading role in the country's politics.³⁴

Although the early phase was tense and the new President Michel Mou'awad was murdered only a few days after his election in 1989, the decade that followed the Tā'ef Agreement was relatively stable. In domestic politics, the main developments were related to the reconstruction of the country led by PM Rafiq al-Hariri, a Lebanese businessman with strong ties to Saudi Arabia who, at that time, managed to strike a working relationship with the Syrian

³⁰ Traboulsi, *A History*; Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon: A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict*, The History and Society of the Modern Middle East (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

³¹ Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon*, Cambridge Middle East Studies (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³² Boutros Labaki and Khalil Abou Rjeily, *Bilan Des Guerres Du Liban, 1975–1990*, Collection 'Comprendre Le Moyen-Orient' (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993).

³³ 'The Taif Agreement', *United Nations Peacemaker*, 1989. <https://peacemaker.un.org/lebanon-taifaccords89>.

³⁴ Are Knudsen and Nasser Yassin, 'Political Violence in Post-Civil War Lebanon,' ed. Mats R. Berdal and Astri Suhrke, *The Peace in between Post-War Violence and Peacebuilding* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

regime. Damascus, however, continued to act in disregard of Lebanese sovereignty, retaining a military presence in the country and interfering with the domestic and foreign politics of Lebanon – effectively becoming the powerbroker of post-war Lebanon.³⁵

Al-Hariri's process of reconstruction was driven by highly neoliberal principles but also mixed business leadership with politics, given that he was both the Prime Minister and also the main businessman behind the reconstruction process.³⁶ This produced an environment prone to corruption³⁷ that lacked attention to the impoverished sectors of society. While the city centre of Beirut was being enriched with expensive malls and flashy buildings, Lebanon remained a country in which a quarter of the population lived below the poverty line³⁸ and where major infrastructural issues such as the provision of electricity, waste management and road maintenance persisted unaddressed.

Furthermore, in the south of Lebanon the Israeli occupation continued until 2000, peaking at times in high-intensity battles. In 1996, for example, the Grapes of Wrath operation saw a UN compound in the village of Qāna bombed by Israel, killing more than one hundred civilians.³⁹

In the early 2000s, tensions mounted once more. Syria tightened its grip on Lebanon and the President of the Republic, Emile Lahoud, extended his mandate beyond the constitutional terms with a modification of the law imposed by Syria. Al-Hariri, along with a large portion of the Lebanese public, was exasperated by Syrian interference and its demands for control over Lebanon. International actors such as Saudi Arabia also grew increasingly impatient with Syrian meddling and the regional ambitions of Syria's ally Iran, and the UN Security Council approved a resolution in 2004 (UNSC Res. 1559, 2004) calling for the withdrawal of Syria from Lebanon and the disarmament of Hezbollah.

The crisis culminated on 14 February 2005, when al-Hariri was murdered in a car bomb attack.⁴⁰ Fifteen years later, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon sentenced three Hezbollah members in absentia for the murder of al-Hariri.⁴¹ After the death of al-Hariri, several prominent members of the Lebanese opposition to Syria were murdered, including the journalists Samir Kassir and Gebran Tuéni, among others, in a series of car bomb attacks for which Syria was widely considered responsible.⁴²

Nevertheless, these events backfired for Syria. The murder of al-Hariri prompted a mass mobilization against Syrian presence in the country known as the Cedar Revolution and gave birth to the March 14 political alliance between the Sunni forces of *Tayyār al-Mustaqbal* (the

³⁵ Joseph Bahout, 'The Unraveling of Lebanon's Taif Agreement: Limits of Sect-Based Power Sharing', *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 16 May 2016; Rola El-Husseini, *Pax Syria: Elite Politics in Postwar Lebanon* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012).

³⁶ Hannes Baumann, *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon's Neoliberal Reconstruction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

³⁷ Reinoud Leenders, *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State-Building in Postwar Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

³⁸ Francesca Bastagli, Rebecca Holmes and Rana Jawad, 'Social Protection in Lebanon: A Review of Social Assistance' (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2019), 17.

³⁹ Human Rights Watch, 'Israel/Lebanon: "Operation Grapes of Wrath" – The Civilian Victims,' 1 September 1997. www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a7e60.html.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Blanford, *Killing Mr Lebanon: The Assassination of Rafik Hariri and Its Impact on the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

⁴¹ See The Special Tribunal for Lebanon. <https://www.stl-tsl.org>.

⁴² Are Knudsen, 'Acquiescence to Assassinations in Post-Civil War Lebanon?' *Mediterranean Politics* 15:1 (2010).

Future Movement), the Druze group of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and the Christian parties Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)⁴³ and Lebanese Forces.

This mobilization was countered by the pro-Syrian Hezbollah and AMAL, which formed the March 8 alliance. With the 2005 events and the protests that followed, Syria dismantled its most apparent presence in Lebanon and elections went ahead, bringing into office an anti-Syrian parliamentary majority led by Prime Minister Fu'ad al-Siniora.

Lebanese politics was returning to a situation that had been routine in the post-civil war phase: following elections or the fall of a government, the leading parties agree to form a national unity government in which all the main confessional groups have a one-third share of cabinet seats. As soon as disagreement emerges over domestic or international issues such as Hezbollah's weapons, or the funding of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, one group withdraws its cabinet members, causing a governmental crisis, because the government is constitutionally not allowed to take substantial decisions if more than a third of the cabinet has resigned.⁴⁴

This one-third system, in substance, gives veto power to each confessional group. Lebanese politics, then, notwithstanding the need for reforms and governability, failed to achieve these, leading to one governmental crisis after another. Within three decades of the end of the civil war, the country has had 20 governments at the time of writing⁴⁵ and each transition, whether due to elections, cabinet resignations or cabinet reshufflings, entailed months of negotiations and power vacuums, creating a condition whereby crisis has become a synonym for politics.

CAN THE LEBANESE MOBILIZE? THE 2011 ARAB UPRISINGS AND THE ECONOMIC COLLAPSE OF 2019

The Arab uprisings in 2011 shocked the region and alarmed Lebanese political elites. Yet, Lebanon was relatively isolated from the tumultuous regional events; according to some analyses, the fact that Lebanon's societal and political divisions run so deep and are so institutionalized has prevented the possibility for social groups to unite and organize cohesively against the regime.⁴⁶

This did not mean, however, that the country enjoyed peace. The uprising in Syria escalated into a long and devastating civil war, which forced more than a million Syrians to flee to Lebanon, making it the country with the highest concentration of refugees in the world. The Syrian conflict risked spilling over into Lebanon on several occasions,⁴⁷ especially when its sectarian fault lines began to resonate with Lebanon's confessional politics.

⁴³ The FPM would later switch sides and join the Hezbollah alliance. The pact between Hezbollah and the FPM was sealed by the Mar Mikhael Agreement of 2006.

⁴⁴ Art. 69(b) of the Lebanese Constitution, see: The Republic of Lebanon, 'The Lebanese Constitution: Promulgated May 23, 1926 with its amendments 1995', www.presidency.gov.lb/English/LebaneseSystem/Documents/Lebanese%20Constitution.pdf.

⁴⁵ See the list of government: The Republic of Lebanon, 'The Presidency of the Council of Ministers', www.pcm.gov.lb/arabic/subpg.aspx?pageid=3639.

⁴⁶ Tamirace Fakhoury, 'Do Power-Sharing Systems Behave Differently amid Regional Uprisings? Lebanon in the Arab Protest Wave', *Middle East Journal* 68:4 (2014).

⁴⁷ Bassel F. Salloukh, 'The Syrian War: Spillover Effects on Lebanon', *Middle East Policy* 24:1 (2017).

The Lebanese opponents of the Syrian regime hoped for the fall of al-Asad, but these expectations were soon disappointed. Hezbollah, however, had reasons to be concerned with developments in Syria and the region and, notwithstanding the official neutrality policy of Lebanon, it intervened in Syria on the side of Damascus, along with Russia and Iran.

Regional turmoil precipitated greater uncertainty and allowed the political elites to stall any significant decisions with the excuse of preventing insecurity. The parliamentary elections were postponed for five years, until 2018. The seat of the presidential office was left vacant for more than two years after the end of Michel Suleiman's term in 2014 and only at the end of 2016 was Michel 'Aoun, an old-guard Christian political leader from the political elite, elected to office.

Between governmental crises and phases of power vacuum, Lebanon received offers of support to improve the economic situation and prevent collapse, given that public debt was reaching unprecedented levels.⁴⁸ Typically, such offers of support came from a group of western states gathered in the Cedre Conference, led by France, which had an interest in keeping Lebanon closer to the pro-western fold to counter the influence of Iran and Syria.⁴⁹ Yet, this aid was conditional on credible reforms of the economic, political and judicial systems, along with improvements in the security situation. No government has been able or willing to inspire sufficient confidence in the potential creditors, thus leaving these resources untapped.

Furthermore, Lebanon identified potential gas and oil resources that could have been beneficial to the state's economy, yet the possibility to exploit these resources has been prevented by a territorial dispute with Israel in the south and the very slow process of setting up the legal and physical infrastructure to begin the exploration and eventually the extraction of oil.⁵⁰

In October 2019 the situation reached boiling point when the government proposed to tax the use of a popular messaging app and the value of the Lebanese lira began to fall vertiginously. The question of mobilization within Lebanese society emerged again. Protests, later to be known as the 17 October Uprisings, erupted in the streets of Beirut and other major cities. For the first time, sizable groups of Lebanese society, regardless of confessional affiliation, raised against the political system, calling for the removal of all political leaders with the motto '*kilnā y'any kilnā*' ('all of them means all of them'). No cohesive reformist or revolutionary plan, however, emerged from the protests; lacking organization and a unifying force, the uprising subsequently lost momentum, also because of the global Covid-19 pandemic.⁵¹

The banking system of the country collapsed, revealing the unsustainable, lucrative and potentially fraudulent system of borrowing and lending between the Lebanese Central Bank

⁴⁸ The Lebanese public debt was among the highest in the world, at 170 per cent of its GDP, in 2019. World Bank, 'Lebanon's Economic Update – April 2020', 16 April 2020.

⁴⁹ Assem Dandashly, 'EU–Lebanon Relations', in *Routledge Handbook of EU–Middle East Relations*, eds Dimitris Bouris, Daniela Huber and Michelle Pace (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

⁵⁰ S. Atallah and B. Fattouh, *The Future of Petroleum in Lebanon: Energy, Politics and Economic Growth* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

⁵¹ Ibrahim Halawi and Bassel F. Salloukh, 'Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will after the 17 October Protests in Lebanon', *Middle East Law and Governance* 12:3 (2020); Tamirace Fakhoury, 'The Unmaking of Lebanon's Sectarian Order? The October Uprising and Its Drivers', *IAI Commentaries* 19:66 (2019).

and private Lebanese banks on which it was based.⁵² The results were devastating. Three years after the beginning of the crisis, in 2019, the Lebanese lira had lost more than 90 per cent of its value. The country defaulted in March 2020, becoming officially insolvent, and banks began to limit cash withdrawals to their customers. The reserve of foreign liquidity dried up. The World Bank defined Lebanon's crisis as 'deliberate depression', accusing the political elite of ineptitude.⁵³

But the Lebanese found that this was not the lowest point their country could reach. On 4 August 2020 an enormous blast rocked the city of Beirut, devastating the areas surrounding the port near the city centre, killing more than 200 people, wounding thousands and leaving the entire population traumatized. The explosion was due to a deposit of nitrate ammonium, a chemical compound used for explosives and fertilizers, that had been negligently abandoned and left for years in the hangars of the port. The breathtaking images of one of the largest non-nuclear explosions ever witnessed spread rage in Lebanon and the world, but investigations have been regularly sabotaged by the stone-faced political leadership, which accuses the judiciary of political bias and raised the suspicion of foreign meddling. The prospect that the truth behind this crime will ever emerge is improbable.⁵⁴

The Lebanese political system that emerged from the civil war in 1989 did not bring about the change necessary for the country to find a way forward. The political leadership has been unwilling as well as incapable of reform because it has prioritized self-preservation and privilege while claiming to safeguard stability and security over the risk of conflict. The politics of the one-third veto was the institutional mechanism that stalled any change in the country and any form of governance even for the most essential aspects such as developing the energy infrastructure or dealing with environmental pollution. International actors favoured the paralysis of Lebanon, either because it reflected their interests or because of concern that reforms may produce instability or create unfavourable conditions for their local and regional expectations.

But preserving stability over the risk of reform has driven a declining curve in the lives of the Lebanese people, with an unprecedented fall in living conditions causing impoverishment, emigration and social tension. Any social force that has tried to oppose this process has been unable to find sufficient unity and resources to revolutionize the system; instead they often ended up defeated, co-opted or hijacked by pre-existing power structures. In the 2022 elections, an unprecedented number of independent MPs were elected, yet most of the parliament was still constituted by the old political groups reconfirming their political roles.

Sectarian dynamics continue to sow divisions within society while security concerns, warnings of a possible descent into civil war and the potential for a new Hezbollah–Israel war or the return of terrorism have been continually prospected, as a form of blackmail of the Lebanese, as the inevitable outcome of any attempt to achieve change.

⁵² Fadi Hassan and Ugo Panizza, 'Understanding the Lebanese Financial Crisis,' *Financial Times*, 20 December 2019. www.ft.com/content/282eba28-9ed9-4b8f-8cc8-50d2096a400a.

⁵³ World Bank, 'Lebanon Economic Monitor: The Deliberate Depression, Fall 2020,' 1 December 2020. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34842>.

⁵⁴ Forensic Architecture, 'The Beirut Explosion', 17 November 2020. <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/beirut-port-explosion>; Human Rights Watch, '"They Killed Us from the Inside": An Investigation into the August 4 Beirut Blast', 3 August 2021. www.hrw.org/report/2021/08/03/they-killed-us-inside/investigation-august-4-beirut-blast.

THE CASE OF HEZBOLLAH: FROM RESISTANCE TO SUBSISTENCE

We have seen how the history and the institutional structure of Lebanon are characterized by tensions between the state – weak and fragmented – and societal actors whose strength stems from religious and kinship networks, often backed up by economic resources and weapons. Much of the economic, social and political dynamics of this country revolve around the attempts to balance between these two poles and the failure to find stability in this balance.

In the early phase of the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, a major non-state actor, Hezbollah,⁵⁵ emerged, accumulating vast military power and a degree of public legitimacy but also acting beyond and against the state authority.

The formation of Hezbollah is connected to the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the rise of Khomeinist Islamism.⁵⁶ It emerged as a group of Shia leaders and combatants in the southern region in conjunction with the AMAL mobilization but is more closely connected with Khomeinist ideology and motivated by their fight against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon.⁵⁷ From 1982 to 2000, Hezbollah and its allies targeted Israeli forces and their allies, also using suicide bombings and exacting heavy losses from their enemy. By mid-2000 the Israeli army decided on a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, which was celebrated by Hezbollah as its own victory. This, however, did not end the conflict: Hezbollah and Israel continue to be at war and in July 2006 fought another war, resulting in major losses on both sides but again celebrated by Hezbollah as a victory because Israel could not succeed in any of its objectives, including eliminating Hezbollah.

Besides the military dynamics, Hezbollah is an actor that has changed across time, assuming different forms and roles in Lebanon and the region. Though it began as a secretive organization acting against Israel and was critical of the Lebanese system, the end of the civil war and new regional and domestic conditions caused mutations and adaptations.⁵⁸ In the early 1990s, and in response to the Tā'ef Agreement, it began to participate in elections, while retaining its arsenal. After the events of 2005 and the withdrawal of Syria, Hezbollah began to be involved in the government with direct emissaries as ministers in the cabinet. A path of socialization into Lebanon's institutions, called by some 'lebanonization', was unfolding, because direct

⁵⁵ The correct transliteration is *ḥizba-llāhi*; the name comes from verset 56 of the sura al-Mā'ida of the Quran, which translates as 'God's party [*ḥizba-llāhi*] is sure to triumph'. M.A. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 73. It is misleading to think that the word 'party' refers to the political concept of party as an organized political movement. It refers to the partisans of God, as those who stand on God's side.

⁵⁶ Khomeini advocated and realized a form of statehood known as the *Wilayat al-Faqih* (the rule of the jurisprudent) whereby the state operates through under the control of the *Wali al-Faqih*, who oversees the state application of Muslim religious precepts based on his status of trained religious scholar. Khomeinism is against Western global influence and imperialism and sees Israel as an illegitimate colonial occupier of Palestinian land.

⁵⁷ Hezbollah also has also the broader objective of ending the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion*, Critical Studies on Islam (London: Pluto Press, 2002); Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*, 1st edition, Modern Intellectual and Political History of the Middle East (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

⁵⁸ Joseph Elie Alagha, *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology and Political Program* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 113–74; Adham Saouli, *Hezbollah: Socialisation and Its Tragic Ironies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

participation in politics had begun to be essential to retain its status.⁵⁹ Hezbollah has been constantly concerned with the public recognition of its role as ‘national resistance’ against Israel because it enables the retention of its powerful arsenal as well as a *de facto* army.

Yet the role of this actor in Lebanon does not have only a military dimension; it also acts as a social force, relying on a network of organizations providing services to a large section of the Lebanese Shia population.⁶⁰ Much of its capacity to do so originates from the economic support that it receives from religious donations (*al-zakāt*) and from Iranian support, which plays an even more important role as a provider of military hardware. Another key regional ally for Hezbollah is Syria, which connects Hezbollah by land with Iran, via Iraq, and is ideologically aligned with its anti-Israeli stances. The alliance of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah defines itself as the ‘Axis of Resistance’ and identifies the fight against Israel and western politics in the Middle East as its common element, but relies also on reciprocal support on matters of domestic politics. For example, Hezbollah is a staunch defender of Syrian interests in Lebanon.

The question of relations with Syria became even more crucial in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprising. Hezbollah took a stance on the side of al-Asad and intervened directly in Syria, taking part in a war that cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians. The rationale for its intervention initially included the protection of its interests and those of its ally, and then expanded to the fight against Islamist forces such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State.⁶¹ In this context, Hezbollah departed from Lebanon’s official neutralist stance on the conflict and some of its ideological principles, such as the idea that its weapons have a primarily defensive role against Israel. Instead, together with Iran and Russia, it became a key factor in the preservation of al-Asad’s regime.⁶²

The decision to intervene in Syria and the incohesive stance towards the popular uprisings marked another turn in Hezbollah’s history, increasingly associating it with the status quo forces in the country and the region. It is telling that also Hezbollah’s leadership was among the targets of the 2019 protests.

Not only does Hezbollah play a crucial role as a domestic actor; its military capacity and the capacity to deliver its objectives has made it a model that has expanded in the rest of the region.⁶³ Hezbollah has direct and indirect ramifications in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, where local fighting groups have reportedly benefited from its training and support.

Certainly, Hezbollah is not the only issue in Lebanon, but its role, and in particular its weapons, are a central question in the broader framework of state reform because they under-

⁵⁹ Augustus Richard Norton, ‘The Role of Hezbollah in Lebanese Domestic Politics’, *The International Spectator* 42:4 (2007); Krista E. Wiegand, ‘Reformation of a Terrorist Group: Hezbollah as a Lebanese Political Party’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32:8 (2009); Magnus Ranstorp, ‘The Strategy and Tactics of Hizballah’s Current “Lebanonization Process”’, *Mediterranean Politics* 3:1 (1998).

⁶⁰ Hage Mohanad Ali, *Nationalism, Transnationalism, and Political Islam: Hizbullah’s Institutional Identity*, 1st edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 35–62. Melani Claire Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

⁶¹ Zafer Kızılkaya, ‘Hizbullah’s Moral Justification of Its Military Intervention in the Syrian Civil War’, *Middle East Journal* 71:2 (2017).

⁶² See Shahram Akbarzadeh, ‘Why Does Iran Need Hizbullah?’ *The Muslim World*, 106 (Jan 2016) 127–40.

⁶³ Hadi Wahab, *Hezbollah: A Regional Armed Non-State Actor* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

mine the state's monopoly of force and prevent the possibility of a democratic institutional procedure. Hezbollah is an actor that has evolved across time, oscillating from Khomeinist radicalism to phases of socialization into broader and quasi-liberal norms. Its recent evolution is determined more by self-interest and survival than by the Lebanese public interest. Its revolutionary roots and its legitimacy as a resistance movement have been eroded by a logic of self-preservation epitomized by actions such as the May 2008 unrest, the intervention in Syria, the sentence of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and the lack of responsiveness towards the needs and demands of the Lebanese public at critical junctions such as the 2019 crisis.

LEBANON AT A CROSSROADS

Lebanon as a modern state is an institutional order that has been founded, and continues to rely, on premises that undermine its governability and its capacity to deal with political contrasts in an orderly fashion. Its confessional political and social structures, the dominance of a highly neoliberal and oligopolistic economic model, the civil status of the legal system and its susceptibility to foreign interference are some of the main issues that, as we have seen in this chapter, have subjected the Lebanese constitutional order to conflicting dynamics that it consistently fails to process in a peaceful and orderly way. The outcome is that the country is consistently either bogged down in crisis or facing the risk, and sometimes the reality, of violent conflict.

Can this situation change? The historical record of the country as concerns reforms is poor, but it is to its advantage that Lebanon retains a cultural and intellectual richness and openness unmatched in the Arab world. In the 2018 and 2022 elections, independent political representatives obtained minor but meaningful victories against candidates of the establishment. Lebanese activism and its social and political culture survive, notwithstanding the challenges posed by the economic crash of 2019 and the brain drain that the country has consequently experienced. Yet, equally resilient are the traditional patron–client relations of the sectarian order and its political parties. These groups manage to hinder change because they still have a degree of public support from within the country and abroad, and because change in Lebanon is always represented as an alternative to security and stability, rather than their preservation.

The domestic political elites' responsibility for this situation cannot be overstated, but equally important has been the role of regional and international actors, which, from the founding of the country until this day, have seen Lebanon as a weak regional actor useful to project their influence in the region. During the mandate period, Lebanon was instrumental to the weakening of the idea of Greater Syria; in the Cold War it was an arena of contention between the two poles of the West and the USSR, and became the battleground for the Arab Cold War as well as the Arab–Israeli conflict; since then, Lebanon has been caught up in the struggle for regional hegemony between Iran, Syria and the Gulf states. The inherent domestic weakness of Lebanon makes it a catalyst for regional and global crises.

The years after the 2019 economic crisis have been and continue to be decisive because the situation imposes decisions that were already largely overdue and have now become existential. As the economic crisis has impoverished the country to an unprecedented level, caused unemployment and further weakened the institutional order, for the Lebanese political class the choice can only be between the creation of a radical reform programme, so that it can unlock international aid and credit for economic recovery; or to continue to obstruct change,

and therefore head towards an irreversible decline. The reformist path, however, undermines the grip that the political class has on the Lebanese state, for example by abolishing sectarianism, establishing greater judicial accountability, disarming armed groups or imposing measures against corruption. This makes it an unlikely choice for the political elites of the country, notwithstanding its utmost necessity.

Lebanon's present and future depend on the degree to which an agenda for the refoundation of the state can prevail over the inertia of those who work to preserve its condition of permanent crisis.

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18. “People, army, resistance”: the end of Hizbullah’s legacy

Mariam Farida

INTRODUCTION

Hizbullah has come a long way from its beginnings in 1985. Its extensive efforts to build a reputation of victorious resistance against Israel and its safeguarding of a robust social services network assisted in legitimizing its commitment as a protector of Shi’ites in Lebanon. This has continued to play a major role in deterring potential accusations against or negative attributions to the party, to a certain extent. It is now evident that Hizbullah’s actions in the region, and in Lebanon more specifically, have become the crux of disillusionment with its ideology, decision-making, and short-sighted strategies. This chapter looks at key turning points in Hizbullah’s political and paramilitary career that have contributed to a shift in how it is viewed: from a legitimate domestic and regional resistance group, to being considered as Iran’s trojan horse in the region.

PARTICIPATION IN REGIONAL WARS

Syria

Regionally, the Syrian uprising and Hizbullah’s active military role to safeguard the Asaad regime positioned the party as the premier agent of influence in the region. It was clear that Hizbullah could not provide a concrete and clear justification for its decision to go to war in Syria. For example, just days before sending militiamen to push the anti-Asaad regime rebels from the town of Qusayr, Nasrallah thundered that “Syria has real friends in the region and the world will not let Syria fall in the hands of America, Israel or Takfiri groups.”¹ Nasrallah did not disclose to his constituents what really makes the town of Qusayr important to Israel or the United States. He was completely aware, however, that if it were taken by the rebels the regime would be cut off from its support in Damascus, and that this would speed up its defeat.

Hizbullah’s pre-emptive military campaign in Qusayr, which eventually succeeded in seizing the town from the rebels in May 2013, also had little to do with Lebanese security. Qusayr is strategically based on a road juncture connecting Damascus to the coast and Aleppo. Its capture was intended only to keep open the regime’s support lines to its Alawite base of support and the essential ports of Latakia and Tartus.

¹ Adam Clark Estes, “Hezbollah’s Thinking about Joining the Syrian Civil War,” *The Atlantic*, April 30, 2013. www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/hezbollahs-thinking-about-joining-syrian-civil-war/315741/.

It is interesting that Hizbullah used different terms to validate and legitimize its military intervention in Syria depending on whom the party was seeking to address. For instance, some of the terms aimed at Westerners related to fighting terrorism, whereas others aimed at Arabs and Muslims were about defeating takfirism or about protecting the country's borders.² This use of language reduces all anti-regime opposition groups to terrorists in the eyes of Hizbullah. Hence, it was not hard for Nasrallah to persuade Michel Aoun, even before he became President, to join him in Hizbullah's war against the Syrian rebels.

Nasrallah no doubt imagined a common rationale for fighting in Qusayr and Qalamoun; namely, to prevent the Syrian war from spilling into Lebanon. In one speech, Nasrallah threatened: "Had we had not fought in Qusayr and Qalamoun [...] the battle would have been in Beirut and the south."³ Moreover, according to Nabil Qaouk, the deputy head of Hizbullah's Executive Council: "The biggest loser is [...] Israel, which was betting on ISIS and the Nusra Front to drain Lebanon, the resistance, the people and the army."⁴ Yet Hizbullah's officials neglected to say that the presence of rebels in those towns threatened to halt the regime in Damascus and would ultimately put them a stone's throw from the Damascus–Homs highway.

Interestingly, during the early stages of the Syrian uprising, some Hizbullah officials were prepared to agree to the demands of the opposition. However, this changed quickly to complete support for the Assad regime, including rapid intensification of military intervention on its behalf, even if this involved using extreme force, causing indiscriminate death and unwarranted suffering for civilians.⁵ There is also a belief that some of Hizbullah's activities in Syria directly oppose its supposed core ethical values. This belief is linked to a series of massacres that killed thousands of civilians—which Hizbullah either took part in directly or turned a blind eye to—given that Hizbullah's members usually advised, trained, and commanded Iraqi and Afghani Shi'ite militiamen.⁶ These include massacres in Deir Baalba, near Homs (April 2012); al-Malikiya, in Rif Aleppo (February 2013); Tall Shughuib, east of Aleppo (March 2013); al-Nabk, between Damascus and Homs (December 2013); and Darayya, in Rif Damascus (between 2012 and 2016).⁷

² Nicholas Heras and Philip Smyth, "The Hezbollah Cavalcade: Iran's Important Weapon in the Middle East," *Fair Observer*, June 7, 2014. www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/hezbollah-cavalcade-iransimportant-weapon-middle-east-99017/.

³ al-Manar, "As-Sayyid Nasrallah: law lam Nuharib fi al-Qusayr wa al-Qalamoun Lawaqa'at al-Ma'raka fi Beirut wa as-Sahil" [Sayyid Nasrallah: Had We Not Fought in Qusayr and Qalamoun the Battle Would've Taken Place in Beirut and the Coast], August 15, 2014, <http://archive.almanar.com.lb/article.php?id=935339>.

⁴ Ariel Ben Solomon, "Report: 'Unprecedented' Number of Hezbollah Fighters Killed," *Jerusalem Post*, May 17, 2015, www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Report-Unprecedented-number-of-Hezbollah-fighters-killed-403341.

⁵ Habib Fayyad, "'Hizbullah' wa 'al-Rabi' al-'Arabi' wa 'Athman' al-Ma'ayeer al-Muzdawija" [Hizbullah and the Arab Spring and the Costs of Double Standards], *Alrai*, September 9, 2012, www.alraimedia.com/Home/Details?Id=66ce6b19-f47f-45fb-990b-812343474a59.

⁶ Shafiq Shuqair, "Hizbullah: Riwayatuhu li al-Harb al-Suriya wa al-Mas'ala al-Madhabiya (2)" [Hizbullah: Its Narrative for the Syrian War and the Sectarian Question (2)], *Al Jazeera*, January 17, 2018, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2018/01/180117110920994.html>.

⁷ Zoi Constantine, "Hizbollah Leader Says Assad Regime Is 'Out of Danger,'" *Al Jazeera*, October 26, 2011, www.thenational.ae/world/mena/hizbollah-leadersays-assad-regime-is-out-of-danger-1.412766.

Moreover, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria is inextricably tied to its "opaque relationship" with Iran and its many "underlying complexities and intermittent tensions."⁸ During the battle for East Aleppo, which the regime forces reclaimed in December 2016, a Hezbollah commander in the area conceded: "We are with the Iranians [...] We have no other choice [...] We are under their command."⁹ Similarly, former Hezbollah secretary-general Sheikh Subhi al-Tufaili conceded: "Hezbollah would not have participated in the Syrian war had it not been for orders from Tehran to defend Asaad's regime."¹⁰ This reflects what Tehran has hailed as the "axis of resistance"; namely, the three-way alliance comprising Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria.¹¹

Alarming, in December 2013, unknown attackers assassinated Hezbollah's military commander Hassan al-Laqqis, a strong opponent of military intervention in Syria.¹² It is believed that in a meeting between Nasrallah and the Iranian Ambassador in Lebanon, Mohammad Fathali, Laqqis said: "Our involvement in the war in Syria is a form of apostasy because we are supporting an onerous tyrant against an unarmed population."¹³ Unquestionably, the crisis in Syria and Hezbollah's military action in defence of the Bashar al-Assad regime has demonstrated the high value that Iran and Hezbollah place on their relationship and the lengths to which they will go in order to protect it.¹⁴ Indeed, there is endless evidence to support the claim that Hezbollah is considered an Iranian trojan horse¹⁵ in the Middle East and probably beyond.¹⁶

Hezbollah has been described as a convoy that "covers a wide range of what could be termed Shi'a Islamist militancy in the Middle East [...] [that is] part of the vanguard for furthering the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 'Islamic Revolution'."¹⁷ Although the party has "exhibited and exerted agency and autonomy of its own,"¹⁸ its sustainability continues to depend on the funding, weapons, and political support from Iran. An analysis of Nasrallah's speeches from 2000 to 2013¹⁹ revealed Nasrallah's consistent referencing of Iran, particularly via religious association, given Hezbollah's commitment to the *Wilayat al-Faqih* doctrine.

The data in Figure 18.1 shows that Nasrallah's references in his speeches to Hezbollah's close relationship with Iran remained relatively consistent over the years, particularly in 2011 (6.61 percent), 2012 (4.75 percent), and 2010 (4.36 percent). The exceptions are 2005 and 2006, where there was no mention of the party's close ties to Iran. To properly interpret these

⁸ Eric Lob, "Iran and Hezbollah's Development Organization in Lebanon: The Case of Jihād al-Binā," *Die Welt des Islams* 59:3–4 (2019), 411, 416.

⁹ Jesse Rosenfeld, "How the Syrian Civil War Has Transformed Hezbollah," *The Nation*, March 30, 2017, www.thenation.com/article/how-the-syrian-civil-war-has-transformed-hezbollah/.

¹⁰ EREM NEWS, "At-Tufaili Yuhajim Tadakhul Hezbollah fi Surya" [At-Tufaili Condemns Hezbollah's Intervention in Syria], July 2, 2013, www.eremnews.com/latest-news/4837.

¹¹ Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Why Does Iran Need Hezbollah?" *The Muslim World* 106:1 (2016), 127.

¹² Ayman Muhammad, "Masdar Muqarrab min al-Hizb: 'Hezbollah Qatala Hassan al-Laqqis bi al-Dahiya'" [Source Close to the Party: Hezbollah Killed Hassan al-Laqqis in the Suburb], *Orient News*, December 4, 2013, www.orient-news.net/ar/news_show/6518.

¹³ Muhammad, "Masdar Muqarrab min al-Hizb: 'Hezbollah Qatala Hassan al-Laqqis bi al-Dahiya'."

¹⁴ Akbarzadeh, "Why Does Iran Need Hezbollah?" 127.

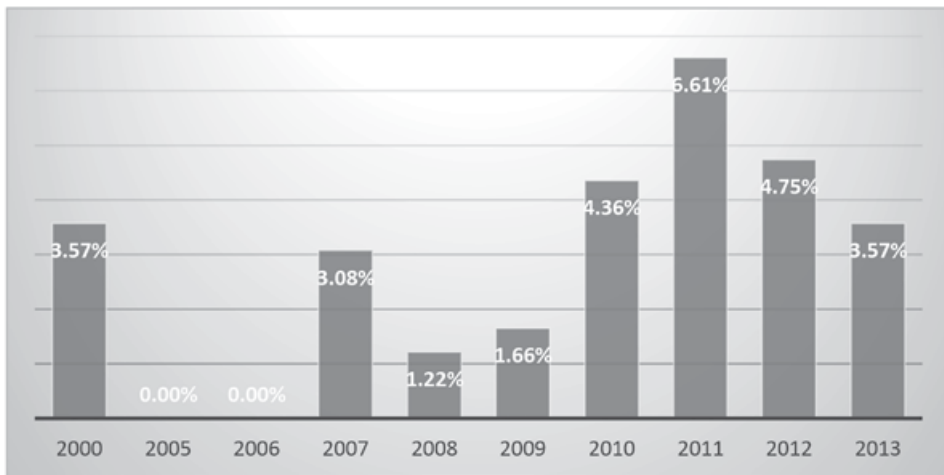
¹⁵ Hilal Khashan, *Hezbollah: A Mission to Nowhere* (Lexington Books, 2019), 106.

¹⁶ Nicholas Heras and Philip Smyth, "The Hezbollah Cavalcade: Iran's Important Weapon in the Middle East," *Fair Observer*, June 7, 2014, www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/hezbollah-cavalcade-iransimportant-weapon-middle-east-99017/.

¹⁷ Heras and Smyth, "The Hezbollah Cavalcade: Iran's Important Weapon in the Middle East."

¹⁸ Lob, "Iran and Hezbollah's Development Organization in Lebanon," 416.

¹⁹ Mariam Farida, *Religion and Hezbollah: Political Ideology and Legitimacy* (Routledge, 2020), 79–80.



Source: Farida, *Religion and Hezbollah*, 112.

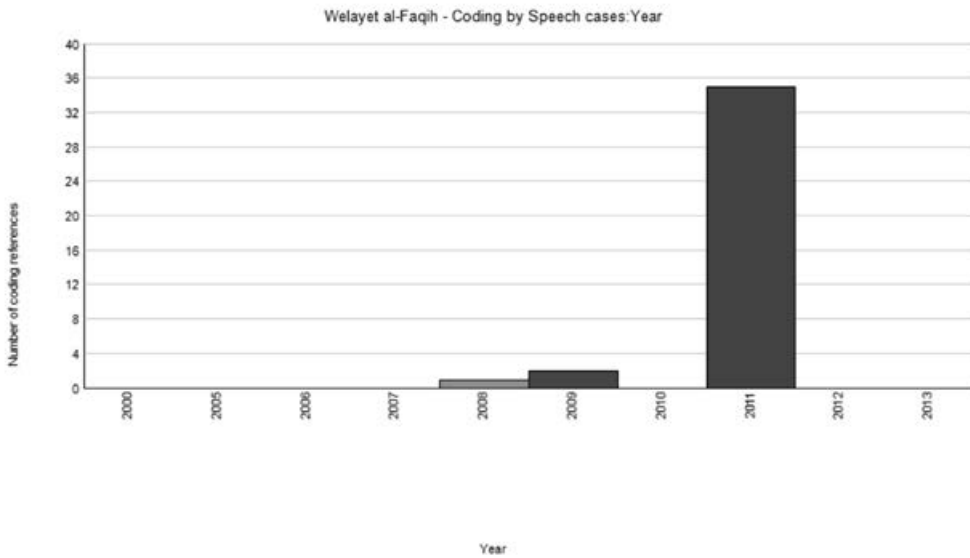
Figure 18.1 *Nasrallah's references to the Hezbollah-Iran relationship in his speeches by year (2000–13)*

figures, one must consider the role played by the regional political landscape in Nasrallah's discourse, as it is this context which allowed his speeches to remain timely and relevant. In the period from 2010 to 2012, Hezbollah's efforts were being channeled in two ways: to play a regional role as part of the "axis of resistance" against foreign intervention from Western and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations; and to position itself as a close ally of the Syrian regime and support Iran's role in the region. The discourse on strengthening the party's alliance with Iran empowered its supporters, as Iran, and in turn Syria, were both in the international spotlight and growing in power during that period. As a result, Hezbollah moved from being a national player to a regional one.

Hezbollah's ideology relies heavily on the doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih* and the establishment of an Islamic system of rule. Analysis of Nasrallah's speeches, however, revealed a shift away from references to the *Wilayat al-Faqih* doctrine. As shown in Figure 18.2, such references by Nasrallah occurred only sporadically from 2000 to 2013, such as when speaking at Hezbollah celebrations (4 times) or at Iran-related events, including the anniversary of Khomeini's death (33 times).

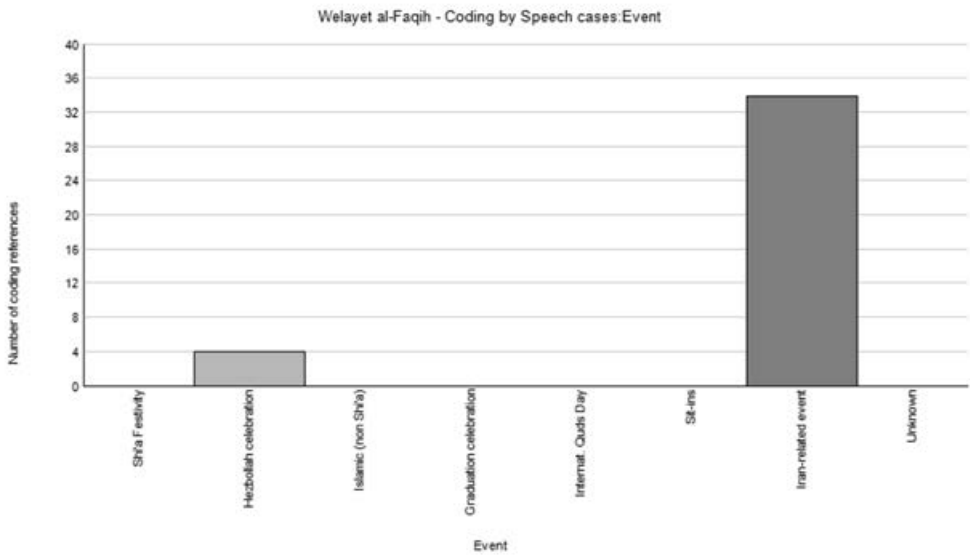
Content analysis of Nasrallah's speeches produced similar results when his references to *Wilayat al-Faqih* were analysed by year. As shown in Figure 18.3, such references were made by Nasrallah significantly more in 2011 (35 times) compared to all other years from 2000 to 2013. This spike in the number of references to *Wilayat al-Faqih* in 2011 particularly can be explained by the growing intensity of the Syrian war and the need for Hezbollah to show its constituents that it aligns itself with Iran and the Assad regime in the face of takfiri groups.

Hence, the active military role of Hezbollah in Syria, in addition to failing to reveal the true motives for its intervention, has arguably turned its legacy from resistance movement to occupying force. It is important to highlight that major Shi'ite clerics consider Hezbollah to



Source: Farida, *Religion and Hizbullah*, 113.

Figure 18.2 Nasrallah's references to Wilayat al-Faqih in his speeches by event (2000–13)



Source: Farida, *Religion and Hizbullah*, 114.

Figure 18.3 Nasrallah's references to Wilayat al-Faqih in his speeches by year (2000–13)

have committed a “historical sin” and a religious error in fighting on behalf of Assad’s regime against most of his people.²⁰ For instance, Lebanese Shi’ite cleric Abbas al-Jawhari denounced its actions in Syria, stating: “The party violated the natural course of Twelver Imami Shi’ism and its history of resisting oppressors and siding with the oppressed.”²¹

Iraq and Yemen

In addition to the Syrian war, Hizbullah’s involvement in other regional conflicts in aid of Shi’ite military groups, namely in Iraq and Yemen, has led some to question the party’s motives. In Iraq, for instance, just like in Syria, the decision to support, arm, and train Iraqi Shi’ite groups came from Tehran.²² Hizbullah had consistently and stubbornly denied engaging in any action in Iraq and it was only when the extent of the ISIS takeover of Iraq was clear that Nasrallah cautiously disclosed the presence of Hizbullah in Iraq: “We may not have spoken about Iraq before, but we have a limited presence because of the sensitive phase that Iraq is going through.”²³ Interestingly, Nasrallah’s careful choice of words arguably suggests he did not want to associate Iran with Hizbullah’s mission in Iraq.²⁴

In June 2014, ISIS seized Mosul, swept through northern Iraq, and drew close to Baghdad. This concerning military situation drove Ayatollah Ali Sistani to issue a call to arms.²⁵ Nasrallah then declared as a matter of fact that Hizbullah played an active role in the joint effort to drive out ISIS militants: “Our Iraqi brothers asked us to send military experts to assist in training and in sensitive battle situations.”²⁶ In Iraq, as in Syria, Iran was the single determinant of the scope and rationale for deploying Hizbullah troops. The justification provided in public discourse for basing the troops in the towns of Najaf, Karbala, and Samarra was to protect Shi’ite religious shrines, whereas the justification for sending troops into Sunni Tikrit and Mosul was to support weak government forces.²⁷ For instance, a Hizbullah commander confirmed: “there were a lot of Iraqis, but we call the shots [...] Most of the push is led by Hizbullah.”²⁸ Thus, Hizbullah’s legacy as a protector of the oppressed against the oppressor

²⁰ EREM NEWS, “Marji’ Shi’a Lubnani: Qital Hizbullah bi Janib al-Asad Khati’a Tarikhiya” [Shi’ite Religious Reference], December 24, 2016, www.erdemnews.com/news/arab-world/660119.

²¹ Walid AbuAlkhayr, “Hizbullah Yakhfi ‘an al-Ra’i al-‘Aam ‘Adad Qatlah fi Suria” [Hizbullah Hides from Public Opinion the Number of Its Dead in Syria], *Diyaruna*, January 15, 2019, http://diyaruna.com/ar/articles/cnmi_di/features/2019/01/15/feature-02.

²² John F. Burns and Michael R. Gordon, “U.S. Says Iran Helped Iraqis Kill Five G.I.s,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/07/03/world/middleeast/03iraq.html.

²³ The National, “Hizbollah Is Fighting ISIL in Iraq, Nasrallah Reveals,” February 17, 2015, www.thenational.ae/world/hizbollah-is-fighting-isil-in-iraq-nasrallahreveals-1.73627.60.

²⁴ The National, “Hizbollah Is Fighting.”

²⁵ al-Hurra, “Al-Sistani Yad’u Li Muwajahat Daesh” [Al-Sistani Calls for Confronting Daesh], June 13, 2014.

²⁶ Lebanese Forces, “Hizbullah Yujannid ‘Iraqiyyin Shi’a li a-Kital fi Surya” [Hizbullah Recruits Iraqi Shi’ites to Fight in Syria], May 23, 2013, www.lebanese-forces.com/2013/05/23/hezbollah-recruiting-iraqis-for-fighting-in-syria/.

²⁷ Alahednews, “Jaafari to AL: PMF, Hizbullah Preserved Arab Dignity,” March 11, 2016, <https://english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=32497&cid=390>.

²⁸ Reuters, “Hezbollah Commander Killed in Iraq: Sources,” July 30, 2014, www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-iraq-hezbollah-idUSKBN0FZ2BI20140730.

continued to decline as its meddling in regional wars had significant implications for Lebanese national security.

Unlike in Iraq, Hezbollah's involvement in Yemen ostensibly began with vocal support for the Huthis against Saudi Arabia, labeling the latter as terrorists and the foundation of extremism. This greatly impacted Lebanon's relationship with the GCC. Since its establishment, Hezbollah has maintained strong contempt for the Saudi royal family and its Wahhabi doctrine, which it links to fanaticism and the corruption of Islam. For the most part, however, the party kept its hostility for Saudi Arabia concealed, especially during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) in Iran, as he worked towards resolve tensions with Saudi Arabia despite not particularly caring for the reformist agenda. Conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's ascent to the Iranian presidency, along with Saudi Arabia's support for the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) to investigate the assassination of Rafiq Hariri and incriminate Hezbollah in it, then encouraged the party to unleash a withering bombardment of criticism on Saudi Arabia.²⁹

The cold war between Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah continued to worsen after the former launched Operation Firmness Storm (OFS) in March 2015 against Yemen's Huthis. The Huthis had swept through most of the impoverished country following weak resistance from the national army. In response to the Saudi-led OFS, Hezbollah stated that it "strongly condemns the Saudi–U.S. aggression targeting the brotherly people of Yemen, its national army and its vital installations [...] this aggression secures U.S. interests and does a great favour for the Zionist enemy." Hezbollah repeatedly associates Saudi Arabia with US imperialism and Zionism and has consistently used this tactic to sustain its popular legitimacy and keep the revolutionary passion alive by redirecting its members' anger away from regional missions. Most of Iran's military assistance to the Huthis is channeled through Hezbollah, especially missile technicians and communications personnel.³⁰ However, it is important to note the Huthis are considered experts in guerrilla warfare in rough mountainous terrain and so do not necessarily need foreign trainers. Iranian and Hezbollah military support to the Huthis is directed only at "annoying and embarrassing" Saudi Arabia by firing occasional ballistic missiles over its territory, for example.³¹ A videotape seized by Saudi troops in Yemen revealed a Hezbollah trainer instructing Huthi fighters on the psychological effect of randomly firing at Saudi border locations in Jizan and Najran.³²

Therefore, opposition to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the region continues to grow exponentially. Central to the success of Hezbollah's political strategy to build its identity and emerge as a major player in Lebanese politics has been its role in the southern borderland area of Lebanon; specifically, its ability to construct "a common identity among the Lebanese Shi'i population" that draws upon Shi'ite religious participation and one's duty of resistance against

²⁹ Mona Alami, "Tensions Flare between Hezbollah, Gulf States," *al-Monitor*, November 3, 2016, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/lebanon-hezbollah-gulf-states-yemen-syria-role.html.

³⁰ Mareike Transfeld, "Iran's Small Hand in Yemen," *Carnegie*, February 14, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/67988>.

³¹ Thomas Juneau, "No, Yemen's Houthis Actually Aren't Iranian Puppets," *Washington Post*, May 16, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/16/contrary-to-popular-belief-houthis-arent-iranian-proxies/?utm_term=.a285aea43ef3.

³² Akhbarak, "Al-Yaman: Qiyadat I'lamiya min Iran wa Hezbollah Tudeer Harb al-Huthiyyeenal-Nafsiyya" [Yemen: Media Leaderships from Iran and Hezbollah Direct Houth Psychological Warfare], January 25, 2019, www.akhbarak.net/articles/35744303-.

Israel.³³ However, the 2016 municipal elections in south Lebanon, Hizbullah's traditional stronghold, demonstrated a decline in the popularity of the party in many towns. The electoral lists formed by leftist parties succeeded in gaining several seats from the Hizbullah–Amal electoral alliance. Additionally, more than 250,000 Shi'ites attended the rally organized by Amal marking the 38th anniversary of Al-Sadr's disappearance.³⁴ This massive turnout demonstrates a significant shift by Lebanese Shi'ites away from Hizbullah and closer to Berri, who remained neutral on the Syrian conflict.

Once Hizbullah's social projects and services, delivered through its affiliated NGOs, functioned "as a soft-power mechanism" to establish a social and territorial base with Shi'ites of Southern Lebanon.³⁵ Indeed, these projects and services helped Hizbullah to achieve popular legitimacy and generate political support in addition to attracting recruits.³⁶ However, there has been a constant and visible erosion of Hizbullah's public image among Shi'ites because of its involvement in regional wars. This erosion has also increased due to Hizbullah's meddling in the affairs of GCC countries.

Anti-Hizbullah disciplinary measures by Arab countries have inclined many Shi'ites to reconsider their support for the party. For instance, following pressure from Saudi Arabia to comply with its policy approach, the majority of Arab League Foreign Ministers approved the move to have Hizbullah labeled as a terrorist organization.³⁷ The announcement by the Arab League coincided with the decision by Saudi Arabia to cancel a previous commitment to give four billion dollars toward arms purchases for the Lebanese armed forces.³⁸ Additionally, GCC member states started to expel Lebanese Shi'ites in 2009, and these expulsions only increased rapidly after Bahrain's failed uprising in 2011.³⁹ Furthermore, in May 2018, Saudi Arabia coordinated with the US Treasury Department to blacklist key Hizbullah members and businesses associated with the Party or to provide any source of funding.⁴⁰ Moreover, new sanctions prohibiting Lebanese Shi'ites from employment in the Gulf shadowed a powerful Saudi statement identifying Hizbullah as a global terrorist organization and determining that there was no difference between its political and military wings.⁴¹ As a result, and somewhat catastrophically, Shi'ites were denied work visas even if they had received job offers from private sector businesses in the Gulf. Hence, Hizbullah's claim to be the protector of Shi'ites

³³ Daniel, Meier, "(B)ordering South of Lebanon: Hizbullah's Identity Building Strategy," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 30:1 (2015), 97.

³⁴ Ibrahim Bayram, "Qira'a fi Nata'ij Intikhabat al-Janub: Tahaluf al-Thunai' Laysa'ala ma Yuram" [Reading into the Elections Results in the South: The Dual Alliance Is Not Well], *al-Mustaqbal*, May 25, 2016, www.almustaqbal.org/content/49587.

³⁵ Eric Lob, "Construction Jihad: State-Building and Development in Iran and Lebanon's Shi'i Territories" *Third World Quarterly* 39:11 (2018), 2103 and 2014.

³⁶ Lob, "Construction Jihad," 2111.

³⁷ PressTV, "US, Persian Gulf Arab States Impose Sanctions on Top Hezbollah Officials," May 17, 2018, www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/05/17/561985/US-TFTCSanctions-Lebanon-Hezbollah--Secretary-General-Sayyed-Hassan-Nasrallah-Sheikh-Naim-Qassem.

³⁸ France24, "As-Saudia Tuqif Musa'adatiha li al-Jaysh al-Lubnani Bisabab Mawaqif Lubnan'al-Munahida' li al-Mamlaka" [Saudi Arabia Halts Its Aid to the Lebanese Army because of Lebanon's Anti-Saudi Political Positions], February 19, 2016, www.france24.com/ar/20160219-.

³⁹ Janoubia, Salwa Fadel, "Ma Huwa Mustaqbal al-Lubnaniyyin fi as-Saudiya?" [What Is the Future of the Lebanese in Saudi Arabia?], November 13, 2017, <http://janoubia.com/2017/11/13/>.

⁴⁰ PressTV, "US, Persian Gulf Arab States."

⁴¹ Fadel, "Ma Huwa Mustaqbal al-Lubnaniyyin fi as-Saudiya?"

in Lebanon as the “people” of resistance is rendered questionable as the party is seen to be unable or unwilling to secure its supporters’ interests outside of the margins of fighting Israel. Resistance becomes an end in itself rather than a means to an end to secure good living conditions and the dignity of Lebanese people, including Lebanese Shi’ites.

“EMPTY TALK”

Nasrallah’s consistent references to Hizbullah’s commitment to support Palestinian resistance also come into question, more than 60 years after the beginning of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Nasrallah deliberately uses “freeing Palestine” as the core principle of Hizbullah’s ideology; namely, the destruction of Zionism and a halt to western hegemony in the Middle East. But the sectarian nature of Hizbullah’s military intervention in the Syrian conflict, crushing a primarily Sunni uprising against an oppressive Alawite regime, diminished its relations with Hamas, who withdrew its exiled leadership from Damascus and called upon Nasrallah to withdraw his fighters from Syria.⁴² Hamas, like most Palestinians, had lost faith in Hizbullah’s anti-Israeli claims.⁴³ During the 2014 Gaza war, the commander of the Quds Brigade, Qassem Suleimani, stated that Iran stood ready to support the Palestinian resistance. Senior Hamas member Musa Abu Marzuk took him up on his offer and called upon Hizbullah to open a second front against Israel in order to ease the pressure on Hamas. He knew, however, that Hizbullah would not fire a single shot at Israel, and simply wanted to demonstrate that Hizbullah was not a resistance party and did not offer anything to Palestine except “empty talk.”

Listening to Nasrallah speak on Palestine at rallies in a loud and threatening manner, or from behind a screen, one cannot help but get the impression that the time has come for him to deliver on his promise to destroy the Israeli state. Yet, Hizbullah’s propaganda machine attempts to convince doubters that the sole objective of Israel is to destroy the party because it is the only serious and fierce defender of the Palestinian cause.⁴⁴ As one Hizbullah outlet describes, “the Palestinian people realize that Hizbullah’s promise is truthful, even though we do not know when zero hour [of liberation] occurs.”⁴⁵ Thus, Hizbullah’s discourse on Palestine is rhetorical and loaded with “a lot of fanfare with no substance,”⁴⁶ and is mainly projected to meet the expectations of its followers and to redeem its respect, legitimacy, and status in the larger Muslim world.

Therefore, it is not unreasonable to question Hizbullah’s legacy and status as protector and defender of Palestinian resistance. This is in addition to the grudgingly catastrophic living

⁴² Daily Star, “Syria’s Sectarian War Causes Hamas Split, Analysts Say,” June 22, 2013, <http://ftp.dailystar.com.lb/News/MiddleEast/2013/Jun-22/221176-syrias-sectarian-war-causes-hamas-split-analysts-say.ashx>.

⁴³ Daily Star, “Syria’s Sectarian War.”

⁴⁴ Linda Merhi, “Mada law Harrar Hizbullah Falastin?” [What If Hizbullah Liberated Palestine?], *al-Mayadeen*, January 24, 2017, www.almayadeen.net/articles/blog/781556.

⁴⁵ Merhi, “Mada law Harrar Hizbullah Falastin?”

⁴⁶ Bahrain Mirror, “Nasrallah fi Khitab ‘Yawm al-Quds’: ama ana al-Awan an Yubayin man al-Dhalim wa man al-Madhlum fi al-Bahrain? [Nasrallah’s Speech on Jerusalem Day: Isn’t It Time to Demonstrate Who Is the Oppressor and Who Is the Oppressed in Bahrain?], June 9, 2018, <http://bahrainmirror.com/news/47555.html>.

conditions that more than 600,000 Palestinian refugees endure in refugee camps in Burj al Barajneh, Sabra, Shatila, and others. Hizbullah is very aware of these conditions and seems to be wilfully turning a blind eye rather than delivering improvements to the inhumane living conditions or even demanding work rights for Palestinians living in Lebanon.

HIZBULLAH FUNDING

More seriously, Hizbullah's funding sources have also suffered greatly due to its regional intervention. For years, Hizbullah depended totally on financial support from Iran. Yet, foreign sanctions and fluctuating oil prices continue to negatively impact its profits, especially when local and regional developments force it to expand its operations and influence. It could be argued that Hizbullah learned about the importance of establishing business networks from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which, in the 1970s, invested a portion of intermittent cash donations from GCC countries to build a business empire that covered several countries in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.⁴⁷ Hizbullah's own businesses vary, from communication gear, sniper rifles, and common chemicals used in manufacturing improvised explosive devices to hospitals, supermarkets, restaurants, construction material, bakeries, home appliances, and furniture.⁴⁸

Apart from financial support from Iran and some Lebanese Shi'ite businessmen across Asia, West Africa, and Latin America, Hizbullah is believed to raise most of its other funds from worldwide illicit and illegal trade.⁴⁹ In recent years, for example, Hizbullah stopped the tradition of organizing fund-raising Ramadan *iftars* out of concern that rich Shi'ites would not attend for fear of being placed on the US terrorist blacklist for funding terrorism. It is argued that more than 30 percent of Hizbullah's profits come from drug production and businesses.⁵⁰ In an example to demonstrate this, in 2016 Abidjan airport security arrested a Lebanese national traveling on a French passport as he tried to smuggle 1.7 million euros of drug money out of the Ivory Coast.⁵¹ In addition, Hizbullah utilized the Lebanese banking system to launder drug money until the Lebanese Canadian Bank (LCB) voiced outrage in 2011 when the US Treasury threatened to impose sanctions against banks doing business with Hizbullah.⁵² Apparently, Hizbullah used "LCB to launder narcotics proceeds—as much as \$200 million

⁴⁷ Nasir al-Badrawi, " Hamas al-Kharij Tamur bi Da'iqa Maliya wa Tatasallah 'Abra Rijal A'mal Lubnaniyyin" [Hamas in Exile Is Going through a Financial Crunch and Is Procuring Arms via Lebanese Businessmen], *Masress*, April 15, 2014, www.masress.com/alzaman/15092.

⁴⁸ Arabi21, "Nushata' bi Lubnan Yarsudun Mu'assasat li Hizbullah wa Yad'un li Muqata'atiha" [Activists in Lebanon List Hizbullah Businesses and Call for Boycotting Them], March 9, 2016, <https://arabi21.com/story/893503/>.

⁴⁹ Ali Rajab, "30 percent min Masadir Tamweel Hizbullah min Tijarat al-Mukhaddarat" [30 Percent of Hizbullah's Sources of Funding Come from Drug Trafficking], *Vetogate*, December 19, 2017, www.vetogate.com/3000177.

⁵⁰ Rajab, "30 Percent."

⁵¹ Orient News, "Man Howa al-Lubnani al-Lazi Yanqul al-Amwal Ila Hizbullah Shahriyan?" [Who Is the Lebanese Who, on a Monthly Basis, Transports Cash to Hizbullah?], July 10, 2016, www.orient-news.net/ar/news_show/117102/0/.

⁵² Lebanon Files, "Wizarat al-Khizana al-Amrikiya Tattahim al-Bank al-Lubnani al-Kanadi bi Ghaseel al-Amwal" [Treasury Department Accuses the Lebanese Canadian Bank of Money Laundering], February 10, 2011, www.lebanonfiles.com/news/238943.

per month.”⁵³ In turn, the French prosecutor-general charged a ring of 15 members affiliated with Hizbullah and referred them to the French Criminal Court in Paris for trial on charges of money laundering, drug trafficking, and conspiracy.

In addition to drug trafficking and money laundering, reports suggest Hizbullah's underground businesses include the organ trade, kidnapping for ransom, exploiting socially marginalized and financially desperate Syrian refugee women in prostitution, and trading counterfeit money and goods. Naturally, Nasrallah has denied that Hizbullah has anything to do with this illegal world of business: “We do not have commercial projects, and we do not have investment institutions that work through banks. I say to the entire world, and as transparently as possible, that Hizbullah's salaries, expenditure, meals, beverages, arms and rockets are from the Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁵⁴ Of course, no one would expect Nasrallah, or in fact any other Hizbullah official, to confess to widespread corruption and illegal activities by Hizbullah.

For some, it is almost entirely unthinkable that Hizbullah would involve itself in illegal activities such as drug trafficking, organ trade, and prostitution⁵⁵ to produce funds. In this regard, however, Hizbullah's conduct arguably echoes the Barbary Corsairs who, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, lived off Christian ships in the Mediterranean. They deemed it appropriate to deprive Christian non-believers of their properties since they were at war with them (Dar al-Harb). The Koran sanctions the use of force against disbelievers: “Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; and those who are with him are strong against Unbelievers, (but) compassionate amongst each other.”⁵⁶ One can interpret this verse to mean that the lives and the well-being of disbelievers are not important. Furthermore, a more direct verse legitimizes confiscating and enjoying the belongings of disbelievers: “But (now) enjoy what ye took in war, lawful and good.”⁵⁷

This verse renders the belongings of defeated disbelievers as spoils of war. Khomeini left no doubt as to his feelings towards Sunnis: “Others are not our brothers even if they were Muslims [...] treating them with disrespect is a necessity of the faith.”⁵⁸ It is then sensible to suggest that his followers—and this involves Hizbullah—share his views on Sunnis. In fact, militant Shi'ites consider themselves in a state of truce with Sunnis until the return of the Hidden Imam.⁵⁹ It is *halal* (permissible) for example, for Shi'ites to take over Sunni funds if they pay *al-khums* (20 percent of the total amount) to the representative of the Imam.⁶⁰ It was

⁵³ Jack Cloherty and Richard Esposito, “Feds: Hezbollah Gets into the Used Car Business,” *ABC News*, February 11, 2011, <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/hezbollah-carbusiness/story?id=12893001>.

⁵⁴ Iftikar al-Bandari, “Masadir Tamweel Milishiat Iran: min al-Fidya ila al-Mukhaddarat” [Sources of Funding for Iran's Militias: From Ransom to Drugs], *al-Ain*, December 20, 2017, <https://al-ain.com/article/iran-drugs-crimes-terrorism>.

⁵⁵ Maayan Groisman, “Is Hezbollah Involved in the Biggest Prostitution Network Ever Exposed in Lebanon?” *Jerusalem Post*, April 6, 2016, www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Is-Hezbollah-involved-in-the-biggest-prostitution-network-ever-exposed-in-Lebanon-450381.

⁵⁶ Koran: 48, 29.

⁵⁷ Koran: 8, 69.

⁵⁸ Ruhollah Mostafavi Khomeini, *Al-Makasib al-Muharrama* [Forbidden Modes of Earning], vol. 1. (Qum: Mu'assasat Ismailian, 1961), 251, accessed May 10, 2017, https://archive.org/details/moamenquraish_gmail_002_20180121_1140.

⁵⁹ Muhammad Malallah, *Mawqif ash-Shi'a min Ahl as-Sunnah* [The Position of Shi'ites on Sunnis] (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiya, 1988), 41.

⁶⁰ Malallah, *Mawqif ash-Shi'a min Ahl as-Sunnah*, 41.

reported that during the Battle of Qusayr (Syria), Hizbullah fighters executed wounded Syrian rebels on the premise of a *taklif shar'i* (mandatory religious assignment).⁶¹

Aware that the deterioration of Hizbullah's role in the region and the reduction of its financial resources had seriously tarnished the party's image, Nasrallah chose to shift focus on to the ongoing matter of Lebanese government corruption. He emphasized that US sanctions would not roll back his promise to fight corruption because it "is a duty that is as sacred as resisting occupation."⁶² The Lebanese state has often been described by Hizbullah as "corrupt," yet the party has become a key part of this system and has benefited considerably from its weaknesses and failings. It is difficult to convince many Lebanese that Hizbullah is in fact serious (or capable) about fighting corruption because it is itself embedded in the political system.⁶³ Its success in establishing its own system within the state of Lebanon was only achieved due to the fragmentation and weakness of the country, quite aside from the corruption of the political system. In fact, enabling the state "is bound to weaken Hizbullah's project."⁶⁴

LEBANON'S BLEAKEST ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL COLLAPSE

Hizbullah took almost no measure to limit, stop, or help to manage the collapse of the Lebanese financial system, which was described as the worst financial and economic collapse since the great depression. Lebanon's rentier economy is collapsing, and the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) figures continue to shrink significantly. Moreover, there seems to be no end to this crisis in sight.⁶⁵ According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2020, Lebanon was one of two Middle Eastern economies expected to show no economic growth in 2021.⁶⁶ The Lebanese lira has become virtually worthless. It has consistently been trading at record lows against the US dollar on black-market exchanges, which mirrors the currency's true value better than the Lebanese Central Bank's official peg. Officially secured at 1507 Lebanese

⁶¹ al-Watan, "Anasir min Hizbullah Yu'dimun Jarha Suriyyin fi al-Qusayr" [Hizbullah Elements Execute Wounded Syrians in Qusayr], October 9, 2013, <https://alwatannews.net/article/56555/>.

⁶² National News Agency, "Nasrallah Expects More Sanctions on Hezbollah, Vows to Proceed with Anti-Corruption Battle 'Till End'," March 8, 2019, <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/101426/nna-leb.gov.lb/en>.

⁶³ Imad Qamhiya, "Lihadha al-Hizb la Yastati' an Yuharib al-Fasad" [The Reason the Party Cannot Fight Corruption], *New Lebanon*, March 28, 2018, www.newlebanon.info/lebanon-now/357247.

⁶⁴ Elias Bajani, "Hal Ya'qil an Yuharib Hizbullah al-Fasad?" [Is it Conceivable that Hizbullah Can Fight Corruption?], *AlKalima Online*, February 28, 2019, www.alkalimaonline.com/Newsdet.aspx?id=369343.

⁶⁵ World Bank, "Lebanon's Economic Update—October 2020," October 19, 2020, www.worldbank.org/en/country/ebanon/publication/economic-update-ebanon-2020; World Bank, "Lebanon Economic Monitor: The Deliberate Depression," December 1, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ebanon/ebanon-economic-monitor-deliberate-depressionfall2020#:~:text=Real%20GDP%20growth%20is%20projected,to%20triple%20digit%20inflation%20rates>; International Monetary Fund, "World Economic Outlook, October 2020: A Long and Difficult Ascent," October 2020, www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/09/30/world-economic-outlook-october-2020.

⁶⁶ International Monetary Fund, "World Economic Outlook, October 2020."

lira (LL) to the dollar, it reached a record low of 15,000 LL to the dollar in mid-March 2021, before slightly rebounding to 12,000 LL.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, Lebanese banks have enforced random capital controls on withdrawing dollars to protect their falling reserves of US currency. This has catastrophically impacted Lebanese purchasing power by forcing locals to use their worthless lira; their deterioration, in turn, has inflated the prices of basic commodities such as bread, milk, or diapers.⁶⁸ The country's extreme poverty and unemployment rates continue to skyrocket. The resulting despair has led many Lebanese to either borrow, barter, or steal just to eat.⁶⁹ Indicative of the current state of misery, stories have even been reported of household heads committing suicide because of their inability to provide even 1,000 LL—or \$0.65, on the official exchange rate—to their family members.⁷⁰

Other factors have exacerbated the crisis in Lebanon, including endless power shortages⁷¹ and one of the sharpest surges in COVID-19 cases globally, spiking at 3,000–5,000 cases daily and overwhelming an already weak medical system.⁷² Concerns about these additional factors have been captured in multiple comments posted on Twitter; for example, from David Daoud

⁶⁷ Souad Lazkani, "The Price of the US Dollar Exceeds 15,000 L.L.," *The961*, March 16, 2021, www.the961.com/price-of-dollar-15000ll/; Souad Lazkani, "Lebanese Pound Stable on the Black Market," *The961*, April 21, 2021, www.the961.com/lebanese-pound-stable-on-black-market/.

⁶⁸ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, "ESCWA Warns: More than Half of Lebanon's Population Trapped in Poverty," August 19, 2020, [www.unescwa.org/news/Lebanonpoverty2020#:~:text=Estimates%20reveal%20that%20more%20than,2019%20to%2023%25%20in%202020](http://www.unescwa.org/news/Lebanonpoverty2020#:~:text=Estimates%20reveal%20that%20more%20than,2019%20to%2023%25%20in%202020;); United Nations World Food Programme, "Assessing the Impact of the Economic and COVID-19 Crises in Lebanon," June 2020, <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/emergency-response/wfp-2020-assessing-impact-of-economic-covid-19-crises-lebanon.pdf>; Vladimir Hlasny and Khalid Abu-Ismaïl, "Lebanese Poverty Rates Swell across Income Groups," *Executive Magazine*, October 28, 2020, www.executive-magazine.com/special-report/lebanese-poverty-rates-swell-across-income-groups.

⁶⁹ Save the Children, "More than Half a Million Children in Beirut Are Struggling to Survive," July 28, 2020, www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2020-press-releases/half-million-children-in-beirut-struggling-to-survive; Laila Bassam and Yara Abi Nader, "'Falling Off a Cliff': Lebanon's Poor Borrow to Buy Bread," *Reuters*, July 3, 2020, www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-poverty/falling-off-a-cliff-lebanons-poor-borrow-to-buy-breadidUSKBN2441ZN; Write Caliber, "Lebanon: Financial Crises Turn to Bartering As Cash Runs Out," June 26, 2020, <https://news.writecaliber.com/financial-markets-lebanon-lebanon-financial-crises-turn-to-bartering-as-cash-runs-out/>; Rouba El-Husseini, "'Hunger Crimes' on the Rise in Crisis-Hit Lebanon," *Daily Star*, July 15, 2020, www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/Jul-15/508989-hunger-crimes-on-the-rise-in-crisis-hit-lebanon.ashx.

⁷⁰ Sunniva Rose, "Lebanon: Suicide of Indebted Father Sparks Anger as Economic Woes Grow," *National*, December 3, 2019, www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/lebanon-suicide-of-indebted-father-sparks-anger-as-economic-woes-grow1.946098.

⁷¹ Verity Ratcliffe, "Lebanon's Late Bill to Turkish Firm May Worsen Power Crisis," *Bloomberg*, July 29, 2020, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-29/lebanon-s-late-payments-to-turkish-firm-may-worsen-power-crisis; Reuters, "Lebanon's Lights May Go Off as Cash for Electricity Runs Out," *Reuters*, May 6, 2021, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanon-could-gradually-go-dark-cash-electricity-runs-out-2021-05-06/.

⁷² France24, "Clashes in Lebanon's Tripoli as Anger Grows over Virus Lockdown," January 25, 2021, www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210125-clashes-in-lebanon-s-tripoli-as-anger-grows-over-virus-lockdown; Isabel Coles, "After Beirut Explosion, Lebanon Faces Surge in Coronavirus Cases," *Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2020, www.wsj.com/articles/after-beirut-explosion-lebanon-faces-surge-in-coronavirus-cases-11597697343; Emily Lewis, "Beirut Explosion: Mental Healthcare Central to

on August 12, 2020, 12.18 pm; “Al-Manar reports number of COVID-19 cases in Lebanon ‘increases very dramatically,’ and hospitals are experiencing a capacity problem,” and from Bel Trew on August 14, 2020, 6:01 am; “A doctor describes delivering a baby in the middle of the explosion, the electricity, generator & back up battery are destroyed meaning ventilators stop working. Medics carry wounded out on sheets in the dark. Full story behind the footage.”

This is in addition to the explosion of 2,750 metric tons of inadequately stored ammonium nitrate at the Port of Beirut which devastated the port and surrounding districts. With more than 200 people dead and 6,500 injured, along with damage to some 300,000 homes, the costs of damages alone are estimated at more than \$15 billion. Meanwhile, Lebanon’s governmental vacuum appears to have no end in sight, leaving the country vulnerable and incapable of addressing the escalating economic challenges. Amid the country’s rapid collapse, the formation of government has been delayed as the power struggle continues between different parties over the form, size, and ministerial appointments of a future cabinet.⁷³

Lebanon’s current crisis is deeply rooted in the economic mismanagement of consecutive post-civil war Lebanese governments—mainly those that held power before 2005—and Syria’s control over Lebanon’s economic policies.⁷⁴ Months of disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 infections have overwhelmed Lebanon’s medical system, and lockdowns have further worsened its economy, with no external help forthcoming. Traditional donors refuse to bail out Beirut, either because of its widespread political corruption or due to Hizbullah’s control over major elements of the Lebanese state.

Hizbullah now vocally criticizes the country’s flawed economic policies and the spending spree during the 1990s that brought Lebanon to the point of collapse. The group maintains its innocence, however, by highlighting its absence from the government from 1990 to 2005. This is done to disassociate itself from the mutual responsibilities attributed to other Lebanese political factions for the country’s downfall.⁷⁵ Indeed, Hizbullah claims that its political and military activities have only impacted Lebanon positively. In an interview on June 17, 2020, for instance, Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem argued that Hizbullah’s “resistance” had revitalized the Lebanese economy.⁷⁶ Similarly, it would be counter-productive to blame Syria. After all, the group was considered a central part of the Syrian-dominated era, acting to control opponents to Syria’s hegemony over Lebanon. Additionally, and as has been indicated previously, the party has spent recent years sacrificing thousands of young Shi’ites to save the Assad regime which fortified, and profited from, the policies that led to the country’s current misfortune.

Hizbullah freely profited from the corruption fostered by Pax Syriana. For instance, in 1996 the party became a partner in Rafic Hariri’s Elyssar Project to redevelop Beirut’s southern

Relief Effort, Experts Say,” *Al Arabiya*, August 11, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/08/11/Beirut-explosion-Mental-healthcare-central-to-relief-effort.html>.

⁷³ El-Nashra News, “Al-Hariri: Aoun Sent Me Yesterday A Formation Which Includes One-Third Veto Power for His Party, It Is Not Accepted, and ‘It’s Not His Business to Form a Government’,” March 22, 2021, www.elnashra.com/news/show/1492584.

⁷⁴ Consultation and Research Institute, “Summary of Lebanon Economic Vision,” March 7, 2019, www.fes-lebanon.org/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/Mckinsey_Plan/Summary_of_the_Economic_Vision.pdf#page=5.

⁷⁵ LBCI, “An Interview with Sheikh Naim Qassem,” June 17, 2020, www.lbcgroup.tv/watch/51357/

⁷⁶ LBCI, “An Interview with Sheikh Naim Qassem.”

suburbs.⁷⁷ From 1996 to 2005—the year Hizbullah first held a ministerial appointment—the Elyssar Project gained 164.5 billion LL (out of a total of 184 billion LL through to 2012), all for projects that never materialized.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, as the group was benefiting from Elyssar, its parliamentarians performatively criticized reckless government spending: not because they opposed the spending per se, but to keep Syria's opponents within the government tightly within Damascus' grasp.

Hizbullah has also largely avoided defections by its constituents in response to the intensifying crises. Nevertheless, the group is caught between an increasingly discontented broader population and Beirut's stubbornly unconcerned ruling political members.⁷⁹ Hizbullah is a critical element in this order and the constituent parties of this caste, in turn, empower the group.⁸⁰ Therefore, abandoning this interdependent relationship would politically weaken the party, or even risk its end. Conversely, holding on to the loathed establishment increases the risk for Hizbullah of alienating its supporters or even making itself a central point of public discontent, as amplified focus is paid to Hizbullah's corruption and its role in bringing the country to ruin.⁸¹

To survive the current crisis, Hizbullah must at minimum retain its current Lebanese Shi'ite support base. This will allow the group to sustain its perceived legitimacy as an "integral Lebanese social and political component" during the current crisis and beyond.⁸² As a result, the party launched a multi-faceted propaganda campaign to avert responsibility that builds off anti-American narratives and which aims to convince the Lebanese people—or at least Hizbullah's support base—that the US⁸³ is purposely organizing Lebanon's collapse. As stated in a Twitter post by David Daoud on June 17, 2020, 11:59 am, "US Ambassador to Lebanon to LBCI: US not preventing entry of dollars into Lebanon. Blaming US for Lebanon's economic crisis is a lie. Truth is decades of corruption, unsustainable policies led to this crisis." Consequently, Hizbullah is also trying to convince its supporters that many of the reforms demanded by Lebanese protesters in October 2019 would actually support this US plot, rather than save the country.

⁷⁷ Malik, *Between Damascus and Jerusalem*, 50; Harris, *Lebanon: A History 600–2011*, 26; Arie Amaya-Akkermans, "Beirut's Elyssar Project: Spatiality and Hegemony," Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities, June 19, 2012, <https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/beirut-elyssar-project-spatiality-and-hegemony-2012-06-19>; Elyssar Project, accessed May 1, 2021, www.elyssar.com/.

⁷⁸ Monthly Magazine, "17 Years since the Establishment of Elissar: Incomplete Mission and Ongoing Expenses," January 20, 2014, https://monthlymagazine.com/article-desc_444_.

⁷⁹ David Daoud, "Lebanon's Uprising Doesn't Threaten Hezbollah's Survival," *Atlantic Council*, October 31, 2019, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/lebanons-uprising-doesnt-threaten-hezbollahs-survival/.

⁸⁰ Daoud, "Lebanon's Uprising Doesn't Threaten Hezbollah's Survival."

⁸¹ Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Beirut Explosion Unleashes Public Anger at Hezbollah, Lebanon's Most Powerful Group," *Wall Street Journal*, August 13, 2020, www.wsj.com/articles/beirut-explosion-unleashes-public-anger-at-hezbollah-lebanons-most-powerful-group-11597350861; Liz Sly and Suzan Haidamous, "Hezbollah Faces Toughest Challenge Yet after Devastating Beirut Explosion," *Washington Post*, August 15, 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/hezbollah-faces-stiffest-challenge-yet-after-devastating-beirut-explosion/2020/08/15/51efdae4-d59c-11ea-a788-2ce86ce81129_story.html.

⁸² Daoud, "Lebanon's Uprising Doesn't Threaten Hezbollah's Survival."

⁸³ OTV, "The U.S. Ambassador to OTV: New Sanctions on June 1st, and This Is the Message that She Conveyed to Diab and Bassil," May 31, 2020, YouTube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnUeVnVsx88.

Although real reform currently remains highly unlikely in Lebanon, such reforms would nevertheless threaten Hizbullah. Real reforms would disempower the group's political allies—the center of its political power—and potentially empower the Lebanese state to counter the group's scarring shadow state and private militia. Hizbullah expects its followers to believe that the group's existence—which includes its armed, political, and social assets—helps Lebanon. Moreover, Hizbullah claims the US has no intention of supporting Lebanon. It claims Washington's sanctions targeting Lebanese politicians such as Ali Hassan Khalil, Yusef Finyanus, or Gebran Bassil only seek to blockade Lebanon further by strangling Hizbullah and weakening its “innocent” allies, rather than to implement measures to limit Beirut's corrupt oligarchs who have ruined the country.⁸⁴

When the October 17, 2019 economic protests erupted, Hizbullah stated that the US was using the legitimate demands of protesters for the cause of subversion in Lebanon. At the time, Naim Qassem told al-Ahed that while Hizbullah understood the protesters' grievances, he worried that some individuals claiming to speak in the name of protesters were taking part in activities that harmed Lebanon and its citizens. This was a clear sign that Hizbullah considered the US embassy was taking over the popular movement.⁸⁵ Hizbullah was hence able to successfully peel away its supporters from the lines of the protesters.⁸⁶ Similarly, the group opportunistically portrayed any local discontent with Hizbullah as a US plot to provoke “civil strife.” For instance, when Lebanese citizens protested against Hizbullah's private armory on June 6, 2020, the group's media retorted that the “US Deep State in Lebanon” was trying to “raise sectarian tensions to civil war levels.”⁸⁷

All this points to the likelihood that Lebanon's sharp decline will continue. As this crisis unavoidably becomes more severe, it may also overwhelm Hizbullah's charitable organizations. The group's propaganda campaign may help alleviate the effect on the party's populace. If the party's efforts fail then it can hide behind its propaganda claims that it failed in a fight with the world's biggest superpower, rather than because its ideas, short-sighted strategies, meddling in regional conflicts, lack of political maturity, and “resistance project” inherently lacked concern for Lebanon's welfare. This would make it clear to Hizbullah's popular base that the party's importance is coming to an end. But, if its propaganda claims win the day, Hizbullah may even emerge from this current crisis in a stronger position. The party will have once again triumphed in turning a tragedy for Lebanon into an opportunity to empower itself and to increase its supporters' opposition toward the US.

⁸⁴ David Daoud, “Hezbollah Considers the United States, Not Israel, Its Greatest Enemy,” *Atlantic Council*, April 30, 2020, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/hezbollah-considers-the-united-states-not-israel-its-greatest-enemy/.

⁸⁵ al-Ahed News, “Naim Qassem: We Are Part of the Suffering People, and Beware Those Trying to Steal the Uprising,” November 7, 2019, www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=12822&cid=113.

⁸⁶ Mona El-Naggar, “Beirut's Shiites Like the Idea of Change, But Like Hezbollah More,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/world/middleeast/lebanon-beirut-explosion-hezbollah-shiites.html?smid=tw-share; Dd Dd, “Screen Recording 2019 10 25 at 11 14 48 AM,” October 29, 2019, YouTube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOBxNMj2blo.

⁸⁷ Abby Sewell, “Splinters in Lebanon Protests Emerge as Some Call for Hezbollah Disarmament,” *Al Arabiya*, June 6, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/06/06/Splinters-in-Lebanon-protests-emerge-as-some-call-for-Hezbollah-disarmament>; Amaal Khalil, “The South's Protest: Against the ‘Counter- Revolution,’” *al-Akhbar News*, June 6, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/289668/>.

CONCLUSION

Hizbullah's ascent to power and its time in such role has been full of challenges, from building a strong resistance militia to stop Israeli occupation of south Lebanon to gaining local and regional legitimacy. Importantly, the group's management of its image and identity has been framed around victory and Shi'ite-centrism. However, Hizbullah's obsession with remaining armed and with protecting Iranian interests in the region has tarnished that victorious image and brought great calamity. The group's various military interferences in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have had great ramifications for the country's national security and relationship with the GCC and has created great division among Lebanese citizens. Hizbullah's self-representation was one of protecting the oppressed against the oppressors, formed out of the ability to cleverly frame the US or the Saudis as the oppressors whenever convenient. This legacy of "people, army, resistance" no longer has a place in a country tarnished by a failed economic system and a failed state. What appears to remain for Hizbullah to protect is supporters who are either too afraid to speak up against the party (in fear of assassination), or do not want to lose the party's welfare support.

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19. Palestine and international intervention

Dana El Kurd

INTRODUCTION

Palestine and the ongoing conflict over Palestinian self-determination has always played an influential role in international politics. Palestine has been a reoccurring theme in US foreign policy, given Israel's central role in American hegemony and interests. And the suppression of Palestinian self-determination has been crucial in determining the trajectory of the Arab world. Wars have been fought, protest movements have erupted, and regimes have been bolstered as a result of Palestine.

Vice versa, international politics has been fundamentally critical to Palestine's fate. The interests of regional and international powers often play out in Palestine, as Middle Eastern regimes have been eager to manipulate and direct Palestinian factions.¹ This has been ongoing since the inception of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964. Moreover, the international system, exemplified by international organizations considered the purveyors of an American-led "liberal order," has directed Palestinian energy away from mass mobilization and resistance toward more formal organized politics.² This has led to the retrenchment of the status quo.

Conditions in Palestine today reflect this reality. To be sure, Palestinians have never had impartial mediation in their conflict with Israeli settler-colonialism, but today it seems the US is more unwilling than ever to play such a role.³ Regional dynamics have also shifted dramatically, with the acceleration of official Arab normalization with Israel overturning decades of precedent on the Arab position.⁴ Palestine is increasingly isolated from its neighbors and from its international allies, and this is palpably felt.⁵

This chapter describes these dynamics, and answers the following questions: how do Palestinians view international involvement in their country and cause? How specifically do they view regional and international powers, in comparison with one another? These include countries such as other Arab states, Iran, Turkey, the US, and Russia. And finally, what does this mean for the trajectory of the Palestinian issue? I use public opinion polling through both

¹ Laurie Brand, "Asad's Syria and the PLO: Coincidence or Conflict of Interests?" *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 14:2 (1990), 22–45.

² Manal Jamal, *Promoting Democracy* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).

³ Nidal Al-Mughrabi and Ali Sawafta, "Palestinians Pin Scant Hope on Biden Visit after Setbacks under Trump," *Reuters*, July 1, 2022. www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/palestinians-pin-scant-hope-biden-visit-after-setbacks-under-trump-2022-07-01/.

⁴ Lucy Kurtzer-Ellenbogen, "Historic UAE–Israel Trade Deal Proves Abraham Accords' Resilience," *United States Institute of Peace*, June 3, 2022. www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/historic-uae-israel-trade-deal-proves-abraham-accords-resilience.

⁵ Zaha Hassan and Marwan Muasher, "Why the Abraham Accords Fall Short," *Foreign Affairs*, June 13, 2022. www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2022-06-07/why-abraham-accords-fall-short.

the Arab Opinion Index and the Palestinian Center for Survey and Policy Research to answer these questions.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, this chapter will present previous literature on the impact of international intervention in the Middle East and North Africa, before turning to an overview of the major powers operating in the region. Then the chapter will describe recent public opinion trends. Following this is a discussion of what these trends mean for Palestinian politics and civil society moving forward. The chapter ends with a short overview of possible research agendas and how the Palestine case helps inform broader theoretical questions in political science.

THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION

The literature on international intervention, and its impact on domestic politics in the Arab world, is extensive and rich. A number of countries in the region have been said to be engaged in a “two-level game,” in which political actors must engage with both domestic and international considerations.⁶ Some commentators have described not just politics but Arab societies as being highly “penetrated” by external intervention.⁷ This has had ramifications at the level of political elites, as well as broader society.

For example, Najem writes that Lebanon is a society “penetrated” by international powers, detailing how the preoccupation of political elites with the international dimension led to the underdevelopment of the Lebanese state.⁸ Salloukh has similarly argued that the interplay between domestic and international politics leaves Lebanon more susceptible to “regional pressures,” and leads to political elites sacrificing sovereignty for “instrumental political ends.”⁹ Lebanon is not unique in these trends; as I have argued in the case of Palestine, international intervention impacts political elite opinion, making them less accountable and divorcing them from the societal “feedback loop.” I have described this dynamic as a principal–agent problem, in which political leaders/elites within the state are the “agent” and society the “principal.” In the Arab world, and in Palestine in particular, this problem is exacerbated as there are multiple principals for which the agent must account: not only society, but also international powers. The stronger principal—the international power—dominates agent behavior in such cases. I showed in previous research how this plays out across different cases of varying levels of sovereignty, that is, both in full-fledged autonomous states such as Bahrain and in quasi-state dynamics such as the case of Iraqi Kurdistan or that of Palestine.¹⁰

At the public level, international intervention has similar, though not entirely equivalent, effects. Corstange and Marinov for example find that international intervention has the impact

⁶ Amaney Jamal, *Of Empires and Citizens* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
Dana El Kurd, *Polarized and Demobilized: Legacies of Authoritarianism in Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁷ Tom Pierre Najem, *Lebanon: The Politics of a Penetrated Society* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁸ Tom Pierre Najem, *Lebanon*.

⁹ Bassel Salloukh, “The Art of the Impossible: The Foreign Policy of Lebanon,” in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization*, ed. Bahgat Korany and Ali Dessouki, 283–318 (London: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁰ El Kurd, *Polarized and Demobilized*, 123–36.

of polarizing society, again using the case of Lebanon to demonstrate this finding.¹¹ Jamal finds that international intervention makes public opinion in Kuwait and Jordan less amenable to democracy, given the history of anti-democratic intervention by the US in particular throughout the region.¹² I built on that work in my own research, finding that society becomes fragmented in the face of international – and particularly American – intervention. Those with ties to the state apparatus react similarly to what Jamal describes, fearful of international intervention and less supportive of democracy and accountability as a result, whereas those with no ties to formal institutions are more demanding of accountability. This creates an environment of societal fragmentation and grievances between the two camps in society.¹³

We see this clearly in the case of Palestine. Those with ties to the Palestinian Authority's institutions, for example as employees, are less likely to support democracy and accountability and are susceptible to the impact of threatened international intervention. Those without ties to the PA are not impacted by such external pressure, and over time this dynamic has created tensions and severe polarization in Palestinian society. This has led to a stagnated political process, with the division of governance in Gaza and the West Bank, no foreseeable electoral process, and political elites that continue to rule without legitimacy and past their mandates. But more than that, it has also had ramifications on the societal capacity for resistance to the Israeli occupation. I show in my research how these dynamics have demobilized Palestinian society, making collective action more difficult to muster even in the face of rising threats vis-à-vis the Israeli occupation.¹⁴

Thus, we can distil the findings of this previous research into three main takeaways. International intervention distorts state–society relations, disrupting the feedback loop between political elites and society and making elites less accountable. International intervention also fragments and polarizes society itself. And finally, such polarization in turn has ramifications down the line, in terms of collective action and capacity for mobilization. The international dimension is clearly not tangential in the Arab world, and in Palestine specifically; it is crucial to understand domestic politics in these cases, and the future trajectory of these societies.

MAJOR PLAYERS

The creation of Israel and the ascendance of the US as an unrivaled global hegemon occurred concurrently. While it is true that the US has in the past taken a more nuanced position toward Israel than recent trends might convey—in the Suez Canal crisis of 1956, for example—the US still staunchly supported the Israeli state in its endeavors in the region and in its conflict with the Palestinians.¹⁵ The US sold Israel weapons and provided the country with a vast amount of foreign aid. Indeed, Israel is the largest recipient of American assistance since the

¹¹ Daniel Corstange and Nikolay Marinov, "Taking Sides in Other People's Elections: The Polarizing Effect of Foreign Intervention," *American Journal of Political Science* 56:3 (2012): 655–70.

¹² Jamal, *Of Empires and Citizens*.

¹³ See chapters 2 and 3 of El Kurd, *Polarized and Demobilized*.

¹⁴ El Kurd, *Polarized and Demobilized*, chapter 4.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Israel—United States Department of State," August 18, 2021. www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-israel/.

end of World War II.¹⁶ Israel quickly became a centerpiece of American strategy in the MENA region. The affinity between the two states can be attributed to the shared Western/European character, their construction as settler-colonial states, and the dynamics of the Cold War.

Understandably, the Palestinians aligned themselves with anti-colonial movements and third world internationalism. And, because of the binary of the Cold War system, this set them firmly in the anti-imperialist camp, with the Soviet Union at its helm.¹⁷ Relations with the US were thus never positive. Moreover, when the US took on the role of the main mediator in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, it unsurprisingly privileged the Israeli position.¹⁸ The Oslo Accords were signed with very few explicit concessions on the part of the Israeli state when it came to the realities of Palestinian statehood.¹⁹ Instead, the US supported the maximalism of the Israeli position and facilitated the fragmentation of the Palestinian cause by helping to take key issues—such as the future of Jerusalem, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and full sovereignty of a future Palestinian state—off the table. The US was also heavily involved in fracturing and deflating Palestinian civil society and mass mobilization. American funding imposed control on Palestinian organizations, in addition to subverting feedback mechanisms between political leadership and society.²⁰

The impact of the US on the current status quo has been particularly decisive. American intervention in the 2006 Palestinian elections—first by pushing for them to happen despite the context of occupation, and second by not respecting the results and imposing punishments—has led to the bifurcation between Gaza and the West Bank that we see today.²¹ This situation led to severe polarization and reduced the mobilization capacity of Palestinians, leaving them vulnerable to continued Israeli repression. American actions also entrenched certain Palestinian elites in a system that has long since lost its capacity to engage even somewhat fairly with Palestinian demands and grievances.

Although the US has been the main player in Palestinian politics, other regional powers have also tried to exert control over Palestine and the trajectory of its liberation movement. Countries such as Iraq and Syria supported specific factions within the Palestine Liberation Organization, which facilitated fragmentation and infighting throughout the PLO's history.²² Syria in particular has been a source of weapons and material support for Palestinian armed factions.²³

Iran similarly inserted its influence into the conflict with its support of Hamas, to varying degrees over the years. Hamas took a position against Iranian intervention in the Syrian

¹⁶ Jeremy M. Sharp, "US Foreign Aid to Israel," *Congressional Research Service*, February 18, 2022. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>.

¹⁷ Of course, this position does not reflect the fact that *the USSR had an inconsistent track record of supporting third world movements*. See Hanny Hilmi, "Anti-Colonial Challenge in the Middle East," in *Decolonization, Sovereignty, and Peacekeeping* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57624-0_5.

¹⁸ See for a detailed accounting: William B. Quandt, *Peace Process American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Jamal, *Promoting Democracy*, 57–93.

²⁰ Jamal, *Promoting Democracy*, 94–123.

²¹ Jamal, *Promoting Democracy*, 171–200.

²² Alan R. Taylor, "The PLO in Inter-Arab Politics," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 11:2 (1982), 70–81.

²³ Laurie A. Brand, "Asad's Syria and the PLO: Coincidence or Conflict of Interests?" *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 14:2 (1990).

uprising, losing Iranian support for a few years in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.²⁴ Today, however, in spite of its earlier position vis-à-vis the Syrian uprising, Hamas is now firmly back in the Iranian camp and attributes its ongoing armed resistance to Iranian material support and weaponry.

Turkey, as a member of NATO, has long-established relations with the state of Israel, including military coordination and exercises.²⁵ Nevertheless, the Turkish government under Erdoğan has used the Palestinian issue rhetorically for internal and regional legitimacy, and the Truth and Justice Party (AKP) has ideological ties to other Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in the region—including Hamas.²⁶ Islamist groups within Turkish civil society have also taken an active role in facilitating humanitarian aid and confronting Israeli policies. One key example is the iHH, or “The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief,” which drew international attention after organizing humanitarian aid flotillas to the Gaza Strip in 2010.²⁷ The subsequent Israeli attacks on civil society activists became a major point of contention between the Israeli and Turkish governments, until the “reset” between the two parties in 2021.

Finally, various Arab Gulf countries have been involved in Palestinian politics as well. Saudi Arabia was a major source of support for Hamas and other minor Islamist parties until its shift in policy post-9/11.²⁸ Qatar has played the role of mediator between Hamas and Fatah, the party currently in power within the Palestinian Authority, as well as between Israel and the Hamas government.²⁹ Qatar coordinates with the Israeli COGAT, or the Coordination for Government Activities in the Territories office, in its monitoring and control of Palestinians in Gaza. Qatar, alongside the UAE, has also played a huge role in reconstruction efforts. Lastly, the UAE in particular has attempted to influence Palestinian politics by hosting Palestinian politicians such as Mohammad Dahlan, a member of the Fatah party and a strongman at the helm of militant groups within certain refugee camps in the West Bank.³⁰

Most recently, the UAE and Bahrain have taken steps to pursue official normalization with Israel, breaking the previous status quo established by the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002. The API, led by Saudi Arabia, stated that there would be no official normalization with the state of Israel before a two-state solution came to fruition. However, this is now no longer the baseline policy for members of the Arab League, given the signing of the Abraham Accords.³¹ The accords have also facilitated other countries in taking steps to normalize relations with Israel bilaterally, such as Morocco and Sudan. Other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, have taken steps to pursue unofficial normalization, which has not gone unnoticed by Palestinians and

²⁴ Peter Jones, “Hope and Disappointment: Iran and the Arab Spring,” *Survival* 55:4 (2013), 73–84.

²⁵ Shira Efron, *The Future of Israeli–Turkish Relations* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), 5–8.

²⁶ Efron, *The Future of Israeli–Turkish Relations*, 3.

²⁷ Efron, *The Future of Israeli–Turkish Relations*, 10.

²⁸ Ian Black, *Just Below the Surface: Israel, the Arab Gulf States and the Limits of Cooperation*, LSE Middle East Centre Report (Middle East Centre, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2019), 6–7.

²⁹ Black, *Just Below the Surface*, 30–1.

³⁰ Jonathan Ferziger, “The UAE’s Invisible Palestinian Hand,” *Foreign Policy*, October 30, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/30/mohammed-dahlan-uae-palestinians-israel/>.

³¹ Dana El Kurd, “Peace and Authoritarian Practices: The Impact of Normalization with Israel on the Arab World” (June 22, 2022). SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4143656>.

other opponents of normalization in the Arab world. This has had an impact on Palestinian public opinion, as the next section will describe, as well as isolated Palestinian political leadership and weakened its bargaining power further.

PUBLIC OPINION TRENDS

In previous research, including my own, the main focus of the analysis was on the impact of Western—specifically American—intervention. This is understandable given the overwhelming impact of the US on the Arab world and the scope of its intervention, which has been unrivaled in the region until very recently.

Today, however, the Arab world and Palestine face a changing reality. For instance, in the aftermath of the nuclear deal, Iran has advanced its intervention across the region—including in the case of Palestine. Moreover, as American intervention has become more reluctant, international and regional powers such as Russia and the UAE have increased their impact on domestic politics in Arab countries.³² It is important to assess how this shifting dynamic has impacted Palestinian politics and public opinion in order to understand Palestine's trajectory moving forward.

The polling at the time of writing from the Arab Opinion Index was conducted in Palestine in December 2019.³³ The survey was in-person, conducted with local partners, and garnered a representative national sample using probability-proportional-to-size sampling. The total sample size was 2350, split across both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The Arab Opinion Index is conducted yearly or bi-yearly basis, across a number of different countries, and has been conducted in Palestine since 2011. Thus, we have continuity of data for a number of important topic areas, including public opinion on foreign policy and international intervention. We can use this data to compare Palestinian sentiment toward the US with that toward other regional and global powers.

To the question “Which country poses the most threat to the Arab world's security?” 51 percent of respondents replied that the US was the greatest threat to regional security, while 26 percent said Israel.

Given the ongoing occupation and Israel's settler-colonial policies of displacement, Israel's position here is not surprising. What is a bit more surprising, however, is Palestinian opinion towards the US in this case. The US is seen as a regional threat given the impact of US intervention in the region in recent memory—with the invasion of Iraq, intervention in Palestinian elections, and support for authoritarianism following the Arab uprisings—but it is notable that Palestinians view the US as more of a threat to the region than their own occupier. Using this data, it becomes clear that Palestinians view the US as the main actor in the region to blame for the dynamics of insecurity. Israel is seen as part and parcel of a grander American hegemony, rather than the main source of threat on its own.

Furthermore, Iran is seen as the third “biggest threat to regional security.” In spite of Iran's position vis-à-vis the US, and its support of Hamas—arguably the only sizable political

³² Aziz Rana, “Left Internationalism in the Heart of Empire,” *Dissent Magazine*, July 8, 2022. www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/left-internationalism-in-the-heart-of-empire.

³³ See the official website for more details: Arab Opinion Index, <https://arabindex.dohainstitute.org/AR/Pages/Arab-Opinion-Index-2019-2020.aspx>.

Table 19.1 Which country is the biggest threat to the security of the Arab world?

	Israel	America	Iran	Other Arab states	Russia	Turkey
Kuwait	50.8	31	10.2	0.6	0.8	0.3
Mauritania	48.5	21	6.6	3.4	0.5	0
Jordan	47.6	28.4	9.5	5	0.3	0.1
Algeria	46.4	33.4	0.5	4.5	0	0.1
Sudan	44	29.5	15	2.8	1.7	0.6
Morocco	38.7	20.8	6.6	2.7	2.4	0.6
Lebanon	38	34.3	17.8	3	0.3	0.6
Egypt	32.5	26.5	13.4	3.9	2.1	12.2
Tunisia	31.8	21.5	1.7	16	0.2	0.4
Iraq	28.8	39.5	18.5	4	1.9	1.3
Palestine	28.6	51	7.4	7.1	1	0.3
Saudi Arabia	14.5	9.9	28.1	6.1	0.6	0.6
Qatar	28.0	27.0	21.0	6.0	0.0	0.0
Aggregate	37	29	12	5	1	1

movement engaged in armed resistance against Israel at this point—the Palestinian public has mixed impressions of Iran. Of all the respondents, 7 percent viewed Iran as the biggest source of threat—third after Israel, but well below the regional average (of 12 percent). In total, 52 percent of Palestinians view Iranian policies as “negative” or “very negative,” and this number has not shifted very much over the past three waves of the Arab Opinion Index. In relation to the latest wave of protest, called the Unity Intifada by Palestinians, only 18 percent of respondents in a recent poll rated the Iranian government’s response to the unrest as “excellent.”³⁴

Russia does not figure much as a source of threat in Palestinian assessments, with approximately only 1 percent of respondents pointing to it as the primary source of instability in the region. This perhaps reflects the historical role played by the country—as the Soviet Union—in “anti-imperialist”/anti-American political movements, which some segments of society generalize incorrectly to present-day politics. At the same time, Russia’s role in Syria is well known, which impacts its image among Palestinians, given that a significant portion of society empathizes with the Syrian uprising.³⁵ As I will address in the next section, the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine has the potential to further polarize Palestinian public opinion on this question.

Interestingly, in fourth place for “biggest threat to security” according to Palestinians are “other Arab countries,” broadly defined. The questionnaire does not go into specifics as to which Arab countries come to mind for respondents, but we can make some educated guesses given other Palestine-specific surveys. For example, in a poll conducted in September 2020 in the wake of Emirati and Bahraini normalization with Israel and the signing of the Abraham Accords, 80 percent of Palestinian respondents said the agreement amounted to “treason, abandonment, and insult” and 82 percent of respondents thought that Saudi Arabia would be

³⁴ Palestinian Center for Survey and Policy Research, “poll #80,” www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Poll%2080%20English%20full%20text%20June2021.pdf.

³⁵ 83 percent of Palestinians supported the Syrian revolution at its onset, and although this number falls drastically to 40 percent when it comes to the Free Syrian Army, the popularity of the Assad regime never rises over 18 percent in the polling conducted on this issue. See Palestinian Center for Survey and Policy Research, “poll #60,” www.pcpsr.org/en/node/658 and “poll #43,” www.pcpsr.org/en/node/210.

next to establish official diplomatic relations with Israel. And although about half of respondents (53 percent) view Arab normalization with Israel as a failure of Palestinian diplomacy, the fact remains that the UAE and Bahrain—and, in the eyes of Palestinians, their Saudi allies—have become ever more unpopular with Palestinians. There was a great deal of outcry over the images of Emirati officials and social media influencers posing with right-wing Israeli extremists, participating in soccer games with the most anti-Arab team in the Israeli league, and pursuing economic deals with Israeli defense and security companies. To some, the actions of Arab countries are seen as a not insignificant threat to security and stability in the region, given how pivotal Israel is to the proliferation of authoritarian technologies as well.

The country that polls best with Palestinians is Turkey. Turkey polls last as a source of insecurity for the region, and its policies towards Palestine are seen as overwhelmingly positive by the Palestinian sample (82 percent of respondents rated Turkish policy as “good” or “very good”). Compare that level of positivity with how Palestinians respond to a similar question regarding Iran: 43 percent viewed Iranian policies towards Palestine as “good” or “very good” in the last wave in which this question was asked (2017/18), an increase from 36 percent in the prior survey wave (2016). Turkey’s popularity reflects the shift in public opinion following the flotilla incidents, in which the Turkish government expressed support, as well as perceived Turkish public support for the Palestinian cause in the years that followed.

Finally, when asked to rate the policies of different countries towards Palestine, the responses confirmed the abovementioned results. Specifically, the question asked: how do you rate the policies of X country on yours? The answer choices were a simple Likert scale (“good, somewhat good, somewhat negative, negative”). The results are shown in Figure 19.1, with Turkey polling the best by far:

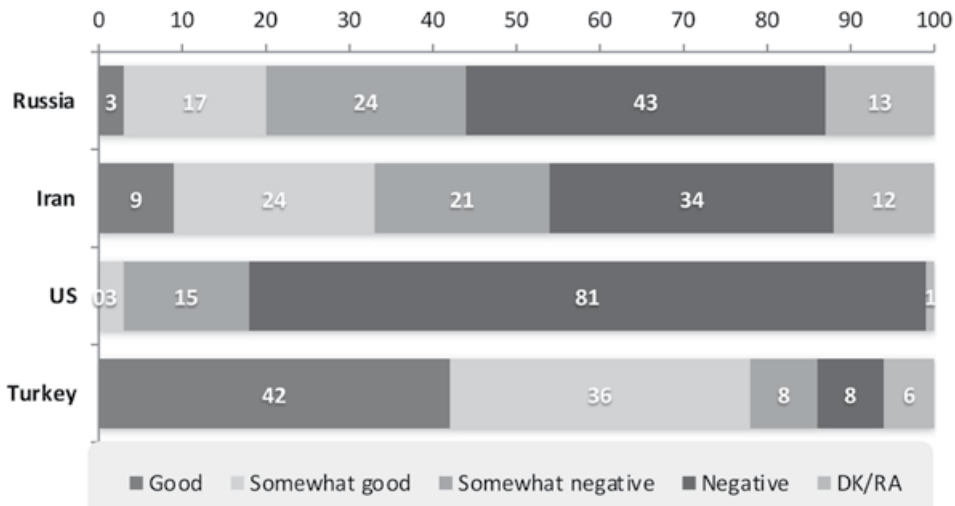


Figure 19.1 Rating policies of different countries

FUTURE REGIONAL INTERVENTION

As previously mentioned, Palestinian public opinion is likely to shift in the coming years, as is the nature of international intervention in the conflict. In line with the rest of the Arab world, Palestine is becoming a polarized issue, and the Palestinian cause is increasingly seen as the purview of the pro-“resistance” camp (that is, Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Russia). This has had, and will continue to have, ramifications for how Palestine is perceived by other Arab populations in the region. Although Arab public opinion is overwhelmingly against normalization with Israel, appropriation of the Palestinian cause by reactionary forces will likely facilitate a shift in how much other Arabs will continue to care about the Palestinian issue. This is especially the case in countries facing continued conflict and repression, particularly at the hands of actors that paint themselves as allies of Palestinians. One example of this is Iraq, struggling with Iranian intervention. We already see declining support for the importance of the Palestinian cause among Iraqi respondents, and these trends are likely to continue in societies with similar concerns around foreign intervention.³⁶ This trend will also make it easier for governments in these countries to normalize with Israel bilaterally and to further isolate and marginalize the Palestinians.

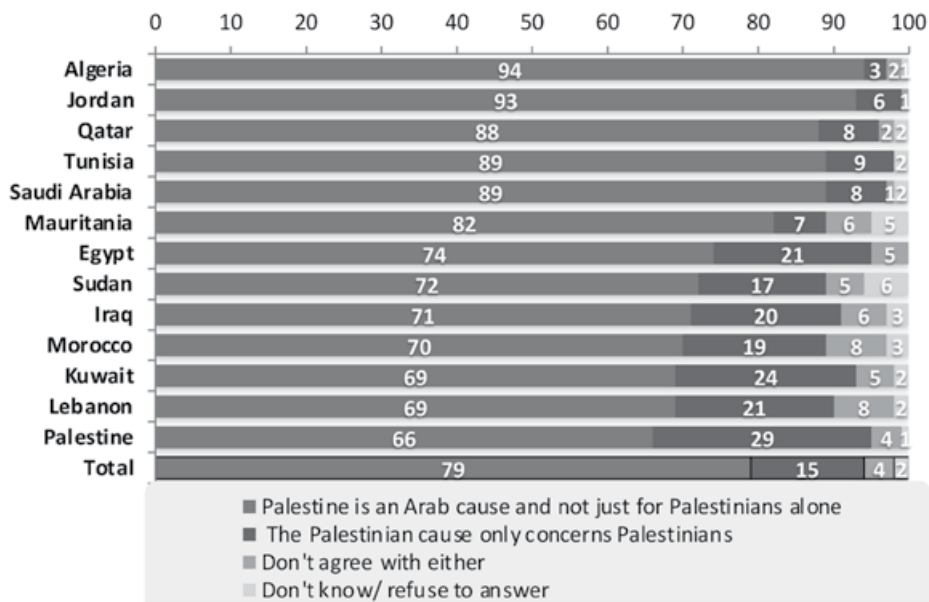


Figure 19.2 *Palestine as an Arab cause versus a Palestinian cause alone*

³⁶ For example, in the 2019–20 Arab Opinion Index poll, Iraqi and Lebanese citizens had the highest rate of respondents who believed the Palestinian cause was one that concerned Palestinians alone. See Figure 19.1 for that data.

Similarly, within Palestine, frustration with an increasingly violent status quo and a persistently silent international (that is, Western) community means public opinion is gradually turning to a polarized “campism,” that is, a binary view of the world that divides the world into “camps” and supports any actor opposed to the “West,” however broadly defined.³⁷

We see this play out with the latest Russian invasion of Ukraine; the hypocrisy of the international community in uplifting resistance to occupation in the Ukrainian case while stigmatizing Palestinian resistance has soured Palestinian public opinion greatly. Approximately 40 percent of Palestinian respondents support the Russian invasion,³⁸ and Russian disinformation efforts are increasing.³⁹ This will have an impact on how Palestinians will engage with international actors moving forward, as those who continue to engage with American institutions or American-led initiatives are seen as increasingly illegitimate.

The nature of the international intervention, in this shifting context, will also look different in the coming years. The US government—beleaguered with internal issues—has proven that intervention from it the Palestinian question will not be forthcoming. Instead, the US has increasingly taken a hands-off approach to the stalled “peace process,” and refused to hold Israel accountable for actions that change facts on the ground or violate human rights. For example, the killing of Palestinian–American journalist Shirin Abu Akleh garnered a highly criticized response, as did large-scale displacements of Palestinian communities such as in Masafer Yatta.⁴⁰ Trump-era changes to the status quo, such as moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, have persisted under the Biden administration.⁴¹ Most importantly, various local and state authorities have pursued the criminalization of pro-Palestine advocacy, to stave off any possible accountability that Israel might face.⁴²

This leaves space for other actors to intervene in Palestine, including regional powers such as Iran and the UAE. Although, as previously mentioned, Iran does not poll well among Palestinians, support for Hamas, an Iran ally, is substantial. Levels of public support always increase in the aftermath of any Israeli aggression. The example of the Unity Intifada is a case in point: Hamas launching rockets in May 2022 in response to Israeli violence in Jerusalem

³⁷ Joey Ayoub, “On Ukraine–Syria Solidarity and the ‘Anti-Imperialism of Idiots,’” *Shado Magazine*, July 1, 2022. <https://shado-mag.com/all/on-ukraine-syria-solidarity-and-the-anti-imperialism-of-idiots/>.

³⁸ Palestinian Center for Survey and Policy Research, “poll #83,” <https://pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Poll%2083%20English%20press%20release%20March2022.pdf>.

³⁹ Jessica Brandt, Valerie Wirtschafter, and Adya Danaditya, “Popular Podcasters Spread Russian Disinformation about Ukraine Biolabs,” *Brookings Institution*, March 29, 2022. www.brookings.edu/techstream/popular-podcasters-spread-russian-disinformation-about-ukraine-biolabs/.

⁴⁰ Ali Harb, “Shireen Abu Akleh: US Is No ‘Objective Observer’, Advocates Say,” *Al Jazeera*, May 13, 2022. www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/13/shireen-abu-akleh-us-is-no-objective-observer-advocates-say. Bethan McKernan and Quique Kierszenbaum, “In the Firing Zone: Evictions Begin in West Bank Villages after Court Ruling,” *The Guardian*, May 22, 2022. www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/22/firing-zone-evictions-begin-west-bank-villages-court-ruling-masafer-yatta.

⁴¹ Ali Harb, “Why Biden’s Jerusalem Consulate Promise Remains Unfulfilled,” *Al Jazeera*, January 20, 2022. www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/20/why-biden-jerusalem-consulate-promise-remains-unfulfilled.

⁴² Human Rights Watch, “US: States Use Anti-Boycott Laws to Punish Responsible Businesses,” October 28, 2020. www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/23/us-states-use-anti-boycott-laws-punish-responsible-businesses.

was a highly popular move.⁴³ Factions that represent armed resistance, with Hamas at their forefront, are increasingly seen as the only legitimate actors in Palestinian politics. And Hamas is firmly aligning itself with the Iranian agenda; billboards of Iranian figures such as Qasem Soleimani have gone up in Gaza, and leaders of Hamas dutifully attend events in Tehran alongside other Iranian proxies.⁴⁴ As such, Hamas's strengthening affiliation with Iran is likely to change Palestinian public opinion trends in the coming years and give space for increased Iranian intervention in the trajectory of the Palestinian struggle.

The role of normalizing countries, such as the UAE, will be equally harmful. Specifically, countries which have signed peace agreements with Israel are increasing bilateral trade and investment.⁴⁵ This will inevitably strengthen the Israeli defense industry, given its outsized role in the country's economy. The UAE in particular has rapidly grown its investments in, and partnerships with, Israeli companies specializing in authoritarian technologies (particularly surveillance).⁴⁶ And since Israel develops such technologies through experimentation on its occupied population, this will have negative repercussions for the Palestinians—as well as for others, such as the Emiratis themselves, who will be the targets of invasive surveillance.⁴⁷ Normalizing countries are also intervening in Palestinian politics by empowering strongmen and facilitating undemocratic processes, whether it is Dahlan on the one hand or Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh on the other. Overall, the “peace agreements” between authoritarian Arab governments and Israel can be thought of as a form of authoritarian conflict management, sidelining the Palestinians and entrenching the status quo via violence. It is not hard to see how Palestinians will suffer under such circumstances.

IMPACT ON CIVIL SOCIETY

Palestinian civil society, and those involved in international advocacy in particular, are now re-thinking their strategies given these conditions. As Tareq Baconi, president of the board of Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, notes:

Palestinians have often turned to international law and Western countries as arbiters of justice. But Western powers [...] have historically failed to uphold their commitment to the Palestinian struggle, and have enabled and supported Israel's oppression of Palestinians and the expansion of its colonization of Palestinian lands. Western states and regional regimes are driven by self-interest and realpolitik, not by morality or justice. Similarly, Palestinians are hoping to build on the resounding success of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement to expand popular pressure in support of

⁴³ Palestinian Center for Survey and Policy Research, “poll #81,” http://pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Poll%2081%20English%20full%20text_Sept2021.pdf.

⁴⁴ Hazem Balousha, “Poster of Iran's Soleimani Sparks Controversy in Gaza Strip,” *Arab News*, January 1, 2021. www.arabnews.com/node/1785581/middle-east; The New Arab, “Hamas Leader in Tehran to Congratulate Iran's New President,” August 7, 2021. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/hamas-leader-tehran-congratulate-irans-new-president>.

⁴⁵ Alexander Cornwell, “Israel, UAE Boost Ties with Free Trade Pact,” *Reuters*, May 31, 2022. www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-uae-sign-free-trade-deal-ambassador-2022-05-31/.

⁴⁶ Who Profits, “Repression Diplomacy: The Israeli Cyber Industry,” June 2021. www.whoprofits.org/flash-report/repression-diplomacy/.

⁴⁷ Darryl Li, “The Gaza Strip as Laboratory: Notes in the Wake of Disengagement,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 35:2 (2006), 38–55.

Palestinian rights. Yet international law and boycott movements, while important tools in the struggle for liberation, will never be the site of our liberation. In thinking about the state of the movement today, how can we shift our focus beyond the tactics of liberation—for example, international law and boycott—to developing a political strategy of liberation?⁴⁸

This statement by Baconi encapsulates a shift in how Palestinian civil society conceives of its struggle moving forward, particularly vis-à-vis international actors. There is a turn away from formal institutionalized politics and lobbying, and an increased awareness of the limitations of legal advocacy.⁴⁹ This is especially the case given the criminalization of certain types of advocacy, such as the Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement, in a number of countries across the global north.⁵⁰

Particularly following the Unity Intifada of May–June 2021, Palestinian civil society within historic Palestine sees its role in community support and building mobilization capacity.⁵¹ Organizations that have mobilizing capacity are no longer concerned with the peace process or advocating within formal international organizations. Instead, there is a turn to strategies that directly confront the Israeli state, such as protests, riots, and armed resistance. This shift in civil society is reflected in public opinion as well.

In the diaspora, pro-Palestine advocacy organizations are focusing on building grassroots movements and connecting the Palestinian struggle to other political movements specific to each country. In parts of the region, such as the Arab Gulf states, Palestine is an increasingly mobilizing factor.⁵² Pro-Palestine activism in these countries poses a challenge to regime dominance, as it helps to facilitate a sense of political agency and acts as a “gateway” to broader dissent.

In the US, Palestine is now connected to Black Lives Matter, First Amendment issues, and the land-back movement, among others.⁵³ The Palestinian cause has also mobilized Palestinian diaspora communities themselves, via calls to protest and educational campaigns.⁵⁴ Similar to Palestinian civil society in occupied Palestine, there is a turn away from electoral politics and formalized spaces, though an alternative method to confront Israeli occupation directly

⁴⁸ Tareq Baconi, “A Palestinian Response to Global and Regional Trends,” *Al-Shabaka*, June 29, 2022. <https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/a-palestinian-response-to-global-and-regional-trends/>.

⁴⁹ Soheir Asaad and Rania Muhareb, “Dismantle What? Amnesty’s Conflicted Messaging on Israeli Apartheid,” *Institute for Palestine Studies*, February 15, 2022. www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1652565.

⁵⁰ Ryvka Barnard, “Britain’s Anti-BDS Law Is an Attack on Democracy,” *Jacobin*, February 2, 2022. <https://jacobin.com/2022/02/uk-anti-boycott-divestment-sanctions-law-parliament>.

⁵¹ Dana El Kurd, “The Strengthening of Palestinian Civil Society Activism—Part I,” *New Lines Institute*, October 6, 2021. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/palestine/the-strengthening-of-palestinian-civil-society-activism/>.

⁵² Dana El Kurd, “Gateway to Dissent: The Role of Pro-Palestine Activism in Opposition to Authoritarianism,” *Democratization* (2022), 1–19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2038567>.

⁵³ Hansi Lo Wang, “The Complicated History behind BLM’s Solidarity with the Pro-Palestinian Movement,” *NPR*, June 12, 2021. www.npr.org/2021/06/07/1003872848/the-complicated-history-behind-blms-solidarity-with-the-pro-palestinian-movement. Brian Hauss, “The First Amendment Protects the Right to Boycott Israel,” *American Civil Liberties Union*, July 21, 2017. www.aclu.org/blog/free-speech/first-amendment-protects-right-boycott-israel.

⁵⁴ For example, the Palestine Youth Movement Summer School programs: <https://palestinyouthmovement.com/pym-summer-school>.

still remains elusive. What is important to note, however, is the growing disillusionment with state actors en masse. Given these trends, intervention in the Palestine case will increasingly be top-down, and the disconnect between state actors and society will be a progressively widening gap.

FOR RESEARCHERS

Understanding the shifting role of international intervention in Palestine, as well as the role of Palestine globally, is a pressing issue for policymakers and those interested in the region's long-term stability. It should also be notable for academics interested in broader theoretical questions and has the potential to inform future research agendas. The case of Palestine can be very useful to those interested in a variety of topics, including but not limited to the following.

1. The effect of multipolarity on domestic politics: for example, how does growing Iranian intervention and receding American intervention re-order domestic politics and power structures? What broader set of cases can Palestine's example help inform?
2. The impact of the crumbling "liberal order": how do local actors shift strategy in their engagement/interaction with international organizations or law, given the current crisis in the international order?
3. Transnational activism: how do civil society actors inform each other, coordinate, and impact domestic regimes? What is the interplay between diaspora activism and civil society on the ground?
4. Conflict and armed tactics: when do groups choose armed strategies over unarmed ones? Are there international considerations for using armed tactics? What will such strategies look like in conditions of almost complete surveillance? The Palestine case can contribute to a broader literature in conflict studies and illuminate new causal relationships.
5. Alliances and peace agreements: how will the Abraham Accords affect regional stability? What are the ramifications of authoritarian alliances for domestic politics?

CONCLUSION

Palestine has a large impact on international politics, and on regional stability, in spite of political attempts to sideline Palestinian aspirations and demands. For scholars concerned with the Middle East and North Africa, understanding trends in the Palestine case is thus crucial to understanding the broader region.

The fact that Palestinian public opinion pinpoints the US as the greatest threat to regional security is important to note. Palestinians view the US as not only entrenching the current status quo but posing a threat to the future of the Palestinian cause. This is especially the case because the US has become less and less interested in holding Israel accountable, while at the same time encouraging policies—such as the Abraham Accords and similar normalization deals—that are ultimately sidelining the Palestinians.

Coupled with increased Iranian intervention in the Palestinian cause, these shifts represent a crossroads. The status quo that was built following the Oslo Accords, under the auspices of American hegemony, is crumbling. Multiple actors will accelerate their intervention in

Palestine and their use of the Palestinian cause instrumentally to further their power across the region. And as research shows, increased intervention, from multiple actors, prolongs conflicts and makes resolution more difficult to achieve.⁵⁵ As such, the abovementioned research questions will become more pressing than ever.

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20. Captured politics under colonial dominance: the case of Palestine

Basem Ezbidi

INTRODUCTION

Investigating the Palestinian political system is no easy task. It necessitates a careful clarification of the term “political” by outlining its scope and limitations because the connotations of this term in the Palestinian context differ significantly from its meaning in other countries. In Palestine, politics occur and must be understood within the constrained conditions imposed by the Israeli occupation, which heavily impact the structure and function of the Palestinian political system.

Palestinian political actors include secularists, religious dogmatists, nationalists, and leftists. There are those who subscribe to democratic ideals and others who align themselves with authoritarian values. There are also proponents of the Palestinian Authority (PA) who consider it an achievement that should be defended and nurtured, and opponents who believe that the signing of the accords was a grave mistake and that the PA is a burden on the struggle. Political discourse takes place between those who subscribe to peaceful methods and others who defend their right to engage in violent means of resistance; it includes those who believe in cooperation with the Israeli occupier and others who oppose such involvement. Furthermore, political strife takes place between those who seek to end the internal split and strengthen national unity and those who are profiting from it. Overall, the “political” in Palestine is a domain that is simultaneously free and constrained: free from the coercive power of a state that does not yet exist, and restricted and constrained by the fragility of the existing political order.

The limited achievements made by Palestinians, and the steady concessions they were forced to make to Israel over the years, have led to ever diminishing options for new conceptions and alternative strategies. Initially, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) aimed to liberate all of Palestine, striving to establish an entity in which Arabs and Jews share a secular state on the basis of equality.¹ Starting in 1974, this goal was reduced to accepting a Palestinian state on the territories occupied in 1967, a mere 22 percent of the land of historic Palestine, while the PLO expressed readiness to reach an agreement through negotiations.² When Palestinian rights continued to be violated, the First Intifada erupted in 1987, involving broad-based popular resistance and protest as well as a boycott of Israeli goods, drawing international attention to the Palestinian cause. In 1993 the signing of the Oslo Accords (OA) initiated the establishment of the PA, tasking it with overseeing a self-ruled entity whose powers were severely limited,

¹ Rashid Khalidi, “The Crisis of the Palestinian Political System,” *Politique étrangère* 3 (2009), 652.

² See Institute for Palestine Studies, “The Interim Political Program of the PLO, Which Was Adopted by the Palestinian National Council in Its Twelfth Session in Cairo between 1/6/1974–8/6/1974” (in Arabic), https://oldwebsite.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/Interim_political_program.pdf.

while rendering it heavily dependent on international aid. Ostensibly, this was intended to lead to full independence after a five-year transition period, but in 1999 Israel refused to grant statehood to this entity. Neither did it become the Singapore of the Middle East that some had hoped for. Moreover, instead of responding to the aspirations of the Palestinian people, the PA has become a convenient provider of colonial services and has operated as a subcontractor for the Israeli occupation authorities. Nonetheless, it is now the center of the entirety of Palestinian politics, including the political system that has emerged since 1994.

What is striking is the opacity of the PA's purpose and strategies: Should it serve as a weak, elitist political order capable of implementing limited self-rule, with a strong emphasis on so-called security, or should it support Palestinians and enable them to achieve independence? Ambiguity has also dominated decisions regarding the strategy that guides Palestinian resistance against the occupier. Should it apply a soft strategy that entails negotiation, diplomacy, and political and legal work in international forums, or a violent strategy of armed resistance? Because these strategies are not complementary, the overall result of the national struggle has been very modest.

This chapter examines the structural factors that reduce the Palestinian political system's ability not only to confront the policies imposed by the Israeli occupation but also to produce cohesive, effective, and responsive internal politics. Discussing the impact of the Israeli occupation and international aid, it illuminates the internal political dynamics and touches on the overlap between the PA and the PLO and ambiguous legitimacies; the split between Fatah and Hamas; and the operations of the executive authority, as security forces remain unrestrained and political parties ineffective.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION

Israel's influence on the Palestinian condition increasingly suffocates hopes for Palestinian statehood as the situation in Gaza is becoming intolerable and Palestinian internal politics remain directly affected by the Israeli occupation that controls Palestinian land and resources in various ways.

First, the territorial fragmentation introduced by the OA differentiates between three areas: Area A (18 percent of the West Bank) comprises Palestinian city centers, where the PA is at least theoretically in control of civil and security affairs but not of underground resources (water) or airspace; Area B (22 percent of the West Bank) is under Palestinian civil control and joint Israeli–Palestinian jurisdiction and security control; Area C (60 percent of the West Bank) holds the water reserves and most of the agricultural lands, but Palestinians have neither political nor security control.³ This fragmentation affects all aspects of life, such as the mobility of goods and persons, the utilization of resources, the economy, and planning and urban expansion.⁴

³ Ehab Zahriyeh, "Maps: The Occupation of the WB," *Aljazeera America*, July 4, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2014/7/west-bank-security.html>.

⁴ As stipulated by the OA, Palestinians are responsible for planning and development in Area A and, with some restrictions, in Area B, but not in Area C, which prevents urban expansion. This situation is exacerbated by the ongoing confiscation of Palestinian land that serves Israeli colonialist interests but harms Palestinians, impacting urban development and planning. Security considerations are frequently

Second, the Jewish settlements in the West Bank (WB) constitute the most immediate impediment to a solution of the conflict. Since 1995, the number of settlers has grown four times faster than Israel's population; almost one-tenth of Israel's Jewish population now resides on Palestinian land (East Jerusalem and the WB), outside of Israel's recognized borders.⁵ As of January 2022, there are 170 officially recognized settlements and about 134 unofficial outposts (not legally approved but built with government support). Approximately 220,000 Israeli settlers live in East Jerusalem, and approximately 441,600 settlers live in Area C of the WB.⁶

Through settlements, Israel has created a demographic reality that clears the way for a structured apartheid regime in which rights are determined by national identity and settlers' crimes largely go unpunished.⁷ The settlements affect Palestinian lives on a daily basis: Palestinian farmers are attacked on their land, in their homes, and as passers-by on the street by settlers who are guarded by Israeli soldiers;⁸ farmers are denied access to their farmland; and settlements, including their waste, have a devastating impact on the Palestinian landscape, culture, archaeological heritage, agricultural lands, and environment.⁹ In sum, settlements constitute a physical roadblock to peace because they are making the establishment of a contiguous, viable, and sovereign Palestinian state increasingly impossible.¹⁰

Third, Israel uses land appropriation on an ongoing basis to make room for settlements and other colonial measures. In the WB—overlapping with limitations imposed with the categorization into areas A, B, and C—Israel has confiscated 38 percent of the land,¹¹ mostly in East Jerusalem and Area C, officially declaring these appropriations annexations.¹² Israeli law allows, for example, the confiscation of land that has not been utilized for agriculture, but frequently Palestinians are prevented from accessing their land because it is located close to

cited to justify measures that curb Palestinian development projects, but their excessive use reveals them as methodical. See UN Habitat, "Spatial Planning in Area C of the Israeli Occupied West Bank of the Palestinian Territory," May 2015, https://unispal.un.org/pdfs/UNHABSTUDY_MAY15.pdf.

⁵ B'Tselem, "Settlements," November 2017, updated June 2018, www.btselem.org/settlements.

⁶ European Union, "Six-Month Report on Israeli Settlements in the Occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem: Reporting Period January–July 2020," March 8, 2021, www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/EUSETTLERPT_120321.pdf.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, "A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution," April 27, 2021, www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution.

⁸ Tamara Nassar, "Settlers Step Up Hostilities against Palestine's Mosques," *The Electronic Intifada*, July 13, 2018, <https://electronicintifada.net/tags/settler-violence>; and Celine Hagbard, "Israeli Court Rules to Dismiss Confession of Israeli Charged with Burning Palestinian Family to Death," *International Middle East Media Center*, June 21, 2018, <http://imemc.org/article/israeli-court-rules-to-dismiss-confession-of-israeli-charged-with-burning-palestinian-family-to-death/>.

⁹ OHCHR, "Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory including East Jerusalem, and the Occupied Syrian Golan," October 2016, www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/PS/SG_Report_on_Israeli_A.71.355.pdf; Sawsan Ramahi, "The Environmental Impact of Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories," *Middle East Monitor*, March 2012, www.middleeastmonitor.com/wp-content/uploads/downloads/factsheets/the-environmental-impact-of-israeli-settlements-on-the-occupied-palestinian-territories.pdf.

¹⁰ B'Tselem, "List of Military Checkpoints in the WB and GS," June 2018.

¹¹ B'Tselem, "Settlements."

¹² This is not done without purpose. Some settlements were built on fresh aquifers to enable Israel to transport water from settlements to Israel proper.

a settlement or behind the Separation Wall. The main strategy employed to take over land for settlement building has been to seize the land “for military purposes.” Also, unofficial appropriation of land is carried out by settlers who build outposts and roads outside the vast areas that are already allocated to settlements as natural resource and security zones. Official Israeli condemnation of such practices is not followed up by concrete action.

Fourth, the Separation Wall has separated communities and serves as a measure for land appropriation, making land unavailable for crop and livestock farming, which affects Palestinian income generation. According to B’Tselem,

85 % of [the barrier’s route] runs inside the WB [and] has laid the groundwork for the de-facto annexation of most settlements and much land for their future expansion. The barrier broke up contiguous Palestinian urban and rural blocs, severed inter-community ties forged over generations, and abruptly imposed an arbitrary reconfiguration of space based on settlement boundaries and suiting Israeli security forces in line with Israel’s longstanding policy of using the WB to serve its own needs, while disregarding the needs and rights of Palestinians.¹³

The claim that the Wall was built for security purposes and has successfully halted suicide attacks inside Israel is misleading because when the Wall was in its early stages Hamas agreed to abstain from such attacks by choice and for political reasons, not because it was unable to carry them out. By preventing access to arable lands and for livestock farming, the Wall heavily impacts on Palestinian livelihoods.

Fifth, Israeli checkpoints are spread all over the occupied territories and restrict movement not only into and out of the territories but also within. Palestinians, like their imported and exported goods and materials, cannot physically reach the outside world without having to go through Israeli-controlled border crossings—this applies not only to the Gaza Strip (GS) but also to the WB. OCHA listed the presence of 705 Israeli checkpoints in the occupied territories in September 2018.¹⁴ Many of these require a special permit to cross; others simply increase transportation time for goods and persons. Movement and access can also be entirely prevented, which is frequently applied arbitrarily at both regular and so-called flying checkpoints that can be opened anywhere and at any time. The effect on the Palestinian economy is debilitating. Moreover, the lack of control over border crossings (and over areas B and C) has contributed to an increase in smuggling activity not only in Gaza but also in the WB, reducing income from tax revenues for the PA.¹⁵

Last, while the Palestinian economy is bound by the stipulations of the OA’s Paris Protocol, it has also continuously encountered serious challenges related mostly to Israeli restrictions and the unsuccessful peace process, affecting investment. Economic normalcy has dissipated, and Israeli efforts to dominate the feeble Palestinian economy have largely succeeded. The once productive agricultural and industrial sectors are in decline, and the tourism sector was declining even before the COVID-19 crisis brought it to a standstill. Moreover, the economy of the WB and GS imports three times as much as it exports—with 85 percent of exports

¹³ B’Tselem, “The Separation Barrier,” no date, www.btsalem.org/topic/separation_barrier.

¹⁴ OCHA, “Humanitarian Bulletin, September 2018,” October 8, 2018, www.ochaopt.org/reports/humanitarian-bulletin.

¹⁵ Misayef Jamil, “Smuggling and Evasion of Customs Duties and Taxes: The Cost of the Palestinian Treasury and Market,” *Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute*, 2018, www.mas.ps/files/server/20181612091326-1.pdf.

going to, and two-thirds of imports coming from, Israel.¹⁶ Even though a significant percentage of the Palestinian workforce remains employed in Israel and in settlements (around 145 thousand workers with an annual income of US\$2 billion), in the third quarter of 2021 unemployment soared to nearly 27 percent.¹⁷ The subordination of the Palestinian economy is worsened by Israel's control of scarce resources such as land, water, raw materials, and energy and by an inefficient infrastructure and disorganized service delivery. The absence of direct and free access to the external markets—despite trade agreements that promise preferential treatment—impairs the Palestinian economy even further. By preventing Palestinians from using and regulating their currency and by withholding tax reimbursement monies, Israel furthermore prevents the Palestinian economy from developing toward sustainability.

In summing up Palestinian economic and general conditions under the domineering Israeli occupation, Sara Roy concludes that they are characterized not by underdevelopment but by de-development.¹⁸ Israel is undermining the Palestinian economy and weakening the productive capacity that might enable a Palestinian state to implement a rationally structured transformation or initiate meaningful reforms. The current conditions are not only impractical for a sensible political settlement that could bring independence for Palestinians; they also boost further Israeli intransigence that may lead to Israel annexing Area C.

THE EFFECT OF INTERNATIONAL AID

To boost the economy and ensure the physical survival of Palestinians, donor countries have since 1993 provided significant economic and technical aid, encompassing funds, expertise, and other modalities of intervention. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), more than US\$35 billion in aid was spent on the WB and GS between 1993 and 2016.¹⁹ Around 70 percent of the total aid was allocated between 2006 and 2016, at an average of US\$2.2 billion per year. Such figures place Palestinians among the top recipients of aid per capita in the world. The top six donors are the United States, the European Union, UNRWA, Norway, Germany, and Britain, providing a combined 70 percent of the overall aid. According to the financial reports issued by the PA's Ministry of Finance, between 2012 and 2016 the PA received around US\$4.481 billion in aid, of which 39 percent came from Arab donors and 61 percent from non-Arab donors.²⁰ This indicates a decrease in international donor support compared to previous years.

¹⁶ Mohammad Mustafa, "Report: Economic Disengagement and National Development in Palestine," *IMEMC News*, November 8, 2018, <http://imemc.org/article/report-economic-disengagement-and-national-development-in-palestine/>.

¹⁷ Trading Economics, "Palestine Unemployment Rate," 2021, <https://tradingeconomics.com/palestine/unemployment-rate>.

¹⁸ Sara Roy, *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development*, expanded third edition (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2016).

¹⁹ Alaa Tartir and Jeremy Wideman, "Mapping of Donor Funding in the Occupied Palestinian Territories 2012–2014/15: Limited, Disorganized, and Fragmented Aid Data Undermining Transparency, Accountability and Planning," Aid Watch Palestine, November 2016, <https://alaatartirdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/aidwatch-study-published.pdf>.

²⁰ Tartir and Wideman, "Mapping of Donor Funding."

Whereas some international players have perceived of various measures, including development aid, as ways to isolate unwanted opposition parties, others consider such measures as neither developmental nor a proper method for tackling conflict. For example, to this day there remains a deep split among Palestinians, induced by the international community's refusal to recognize that Hamas won the fair and open 2006 elections. Since 2007, Hamas has controlled the (previously already) besieged Gaza Strip, even though it has been boycotted by international and internal actors, faced an increasingly stricter general blockade, and been incapable of fully recovering from Israel's wars led in 2008–9, 2012, 2014, and 2021—essentially in retaliation against Gaza for not agreeing to participate in the peace process because Hamas rejected its very premises from the start.²¹

Politics influence the criteria and ways in which international aid is administered in Palestine: it must preserve the political process that is premised on negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, even though they show very limited success. Aid endeavors to develop Palestinian institutions that work in accord with the political process—regardless of the PA's legitimacy. Aid frequently constitutes short-term interventions and budget support, directly covering the salaries of PA employees, because in the absence of a peace agreement the PA cannot generate the necessary resources, yet unmitigated deterioration and revolution must be prevented. Thus, political objectives supersede other considerations, and foreign assistance does not intend to foster development per se.²² This explains why donors' political objectives have never included exerting sufficient or genuine pressure on Israel to end its occupation, even though faint criticism is voiced against destructive measures such as the construction of the Separation Wall, massive land confiscations, the siege of Gaza, the building and expanding of settlements, or the evictions of Palestinian families from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem or Masafer Yatta in the Hebron Hills.²³ By not taking a clear stand, the international community fails to prevent the widening of gaps between Palestinians and Israel and between the PA in the WB and Hamas in the GS. This makes it increasingly difficult to reach a fair and viable settlement.

Indeed, international aid has moved Palestinians neither to the point of self-sufficiency nor closer to independence; instead, over-dependency on foreign donors deepens structural deficiencies and distortions in the Palestinian economy and undermines the Palestinian political system by making it less accountable. Whereas the OA have created mechanisms that foster dependency and corruption (such as the creation of monopolies because Israel insists that only one Palestinian representative may organize the trade of specified goods), PA reform initiatives and anti-corruption efforts have been carried out mostly under international pressure and within Oslo parameters. Therefore, aid initiatives ultimately (must) serve security, ahead

²¹ UNDP, "Results of the Detailed Infrastructure Damage Assessment—Gaza 2014," 2014, www.ps.undp.org/content/dam/papp/docs/Publications/UNDP-papp-research-damageassessment2014.pdf; and Reliefweb, "Gaza Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment: June 2021," July 6, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/gaza-rapid-damage-and-needs-assessment-june-2021>.

²² See Khalil Nakhleh, *Globalized Palestine: The National Sell-Out of a Homeland* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2011); Toufic Haddad, *Palestine Ltd: Neoliberalism and Nationalism in the Occupied Territory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018).

²³ BBC News, "Sheikh Jarrah: Why Could Palestinians Lose Their Homes in Jerusalem?" August 3, 2021, www.bbc.com/news/57239690; and "Forced from Home: The Daily Struggle in Masafer Yatta," Medecins Sans Frontieres, May 4, 2023, <https://www.msf.org/forced-home-daily-struggle-masafer-yatta>.

of administrative reform: Israel's security, not the security of Palestinians. (Accordingly, this also reflects in the PA's annual budgets, where security allocations must be given priority and in 2018 reached 28 percent of the budget, at the expense of other sectors such as agriculture, education, or health.) Having to comply with donors' agendas has not truly served Palestinians: Palestinian land has not been preserved; nor has real development been achieved. The agriculture sector, for example, receives very limited funding (only 1 percent of the PA's annual budget), whereas generous allocations are allocated for PA staff salaries.

Copious amounts of international aid have failed to alleviate the fact that the promise of Oslo has not materialized, be it in terms of economic development or political peace. Israel has kept all players engaged in a so-called peace process that permitted it to detract from its occupation while devastating the economic capability of the occupied Palestinian entity.²⁴ Palestinians are not able to counteract these measures because the signed agreements commit them to cooperation with Israel in the context of a two-state solution. Despite international aid's apparent failure to deliver meaningful, positive, and lasting change for Palestinians, the key players who could influence this system are not ready to address the root causes of the conflict.²⁵ Thus, the logic that will continue to govern the international aid system is that "the US decides, the World Bank leads, the EU pays, the UN feeds, and Israel destroys!"²⁶

PALESTINIAN POLITICS: INTERNAL CHALLENGES/DYNAMICS

While most political systems are presidential, parliamentary, or mixed systems, the Palestinian political system is exceptionally peculiar. Since its founding, it has undergone fundamental changes that impacted its structure and working mechanisms, strongly affecting its two central pillars: the PLO and the PA. Due to the system's exceptional circumstances and the weak democratic credentials of its leadership, separation of power has never been a serious concern. After all, Arafat, succeeded by Abbas, headed the Fatah movement, the PLO, and the PA with no serious accountability.

PA–PLO Overlap

Since 1993 the PA and the PLO have frequently been referred to interchangeably, and their structures have been confused. The two entities are different, yet the puzzlement is justified because both entities claim to represent the Palestinian people.²⁷ Their relationship is strengthened because the institution-building conducted by the PA is interrelated with, and complementary to, the national liberation advocated and pursued by the PLO.

²⁴ The major drawback for the PA has been its limited leverage in peace talks because Oslo merely granted Palestinians the permission to represent themselves in negotiations, with the prerequisite that they accept and acknowledge the Israeli state (with undefined borders).

²⁵ Jeremy Wildeman and Alaa Tartir, "Unwilling to Change, Determined to Fail: Donor Aid in Occupied Palestine in the Aftermath of the Arab Uprisings," *Mediterranean Politics* 19:3 (2019).

²⁶ Alaa Tartir, "International Aid to Palestine: Time to Change Course," *Middle East Eye*, December 29, 2017, www.middleeasteye.net/columns/international-aid-palestine-time-change-course-1205482743.

²⁷ PASSIA, "PLO versus PA," September 2014, http://passia.org/media/filer_public/8a/e7/8ae7c030-ac1d-4688-b3f4-606fbd50cd41/pa-plo2.pdf.

The PA was founded to serve three purposes: Israel's wish to subcontract its occupation; the PLO leadership's yearning to exert authority; and the international community's desire to solve the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. The OA provided the PA with the resources, tools, and international support necessary to run the daily lives of the Palestinians who live in the occupied Palestinian territory, allowing the PA to devise laws and institutions and manage a feeble economy. At the same time, the PLO continues to consider itself as the representative of Palestinians worldwide, the custodian of the national struggle, and the holder of the exclusive right to make grand decisions. But even though the two bodies carry different mandates, the overlap between them surfaced early on. In 1999, the Rocard Report pointed to the difficulty of differentiating between the responsibilities of PLO and PA institutions—a situation that impedes the promotion of good governance, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law.²⁸

Before the PA was established, the PLO encompassed three functions: it orchestrated the Palestinian strive for national liberation, served as the official representative of the Palestinian people, and provided services. But since 1993, PLO leaders no longer fill these roles and have lost their glory; they have converted from revolutionaries to promoters of Fatah and the PA, receiving allowances and privileges.²⁹ The vibrant political debate that once was fostered by the PLO leadership has been replaced by a dull and dismal discourse, steered by political directives and driven by the fear of suppression and the loss of position inside the PLO apparatus. Today's PLO no longer holds the same prestige as it did before it transformed from a liberation movement into an irrelevant, aging political body that supports and legitimizes the controversial PA. The failure to achieve national liberation has weakened the PLO's legitimacy and is gradually undermining its claim to represent all Palestinians.³⁰ Today, the majority of Palestinians feel no actual connection to the PLO.

The PA was able to seize important aspects of the PLO's role and responsibilities, a trend that increased under the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas. In 2003, as a result of massive international pressures, the post of prime minister was created, removing significant powers from the PA presidency with the claim that this would make the head of the PA accountable to the Legislature.³¹ But actually, the creation of this post—brought about as a result of American pressure under George W. Bush—aimed at stripping then-President Arafat of substantial parts of his powers. Arafat thus labeled the first prime minister to occupy this post, Mahmoud Abbas, the “Palestinian Karzai.”³²

The PA under Mahmoud Abbas' leadership has likewise failed to achieve real progress in the so-called peace negotiations, and the unacceptable occupation persists. Abbas' approach

²⁸ Michel Rocard and Henry Siegmann, *On Strengthening Palestinian Public Institutions* (Washington, DC: Council of Foreign Relations Press, 1999).

²⁹ Meng Shu and Aftab Hussain, “Transformation of the Palestine Liberation Organization: Goals and Means,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 12:3 (2018), DOI: 10.1080/25765949.2018.1534405.

³⁰ Osamah Khalil, “‘Who Are You?’ The PLO and the Limits of Representation,” *Al-Shabaka*, March 18, 2013, <https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/who-are-you-plo-and-limits-representation/>.

³¹ See Article 74 Clause 3 in European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), “Basic Law of the Palestinian National Authority,” March 4, 2009, [www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL\(2009\)008-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL(2009)008-e).

³² Tariq Dana, “Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority's Succession Dilemma,” *The New Arab*, August 12, 2021, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/mahmoud-abbas-and-pas-succession-dilemma>.

has neither achieved internal unity nor attracted sufficient popular support to revive the decaying Palestinian national movement. Under his leadership, the process of institution-building has gradually taken precedence over the agenda of national liberation, which explains the declining role of the PLO and the growth of the PA's importance over the years. And the fierce conflict between Fatah and Hamas over the question of who may lead intensifies the PA–PLO overlap because the latter still bestows the legitimacy that is required to run the former.³³

The difficulty of differentiating between the mandates of the PLO and the PA renders it challenging to foresee the direction in which their future relationship may develop. Many questions are raised here,³⁴ such as whether these two bodies will become different entities with distinct functions and identities, and what might happen to the PA if the PLO rejuvenates itself. Possible outcomes include that the PA will be “absorbed” by the reformed PLO, but decisions will have to be made over whether the Palestinian National Council (PNC, the legislative body of the PLO) will eventually replace the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC, a PA body). In a reformed PLO, how should the size of a new PNC be determined, and how should the seats between local and displaced Palestinian representatives be distributed? Questions also arise over how to register eligible voters who live outside of Palestine but are not registered with UNRWA and over how Palestinians with Israeli citizenship could be included, as details regarding voting processes and their funding and concerning the PLO's Central Council must be clarified. In May 2018, the PNC convened after 22 years of inaction. This long absence, during which the Oslo “peace process” has not advanced Palestinian rights or independence, demonstrates how the Palestinian leadership has in fact hindered the PLO in fulfilling its mission of representing all Palestinians. It shows how the PA leadership continues to dominate the political field, indicating its unwillingness to include others in leading the Palestinians, as is apparent in the split between Fatah and Hamas.

Mahmoud Abbas is a key factor in the current political system's limitations and future prospects. Since he took power in 2005, Abbas has consolidated his grip within the PA, PLO, and Fatah. He has steadily purged and persecuted his political opponents, which has enabled him to control the decision-making process. Varying authoritarian measures were adopted to besiege the opposition and demote popular participation, exacerbating political fragmentation and the internal contention with Hamas. Consequently, the public's trust in traditional political structures has declined, and questions regarding their substance and legitimacy have been raised. Similarly, a decline in popular support for Fatah and Hamas can be noticed, especially among Palestinian youth, who have become excluded and isolated from Palestinian politics and the elites.³⁵

The permanent background to this fragmentation is the Israeli occupation. But whereas Palestinians generally agree on their desire to end the occupation, they disagree over how to achieve this goal. Nor have clear institutional mechanisms to manage the upcoming transition of the Palestinian leadership been developed. Abbas has repeatedly postponed the legislative

³³ See Dag Tuastad, “Democratizing the PLO: Prospects and Obstacles,” *Peace Research Institute Oslo*, January 2012, <https://yplus.ps/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Tuastad-Dag-Democratizing-the-PLO-Prospects-and-Obstacles.pdf>.

³⁴ See PASSIA “PLO versus PA.”

³⁵ Reni Zhelyazkova, “Young People Remain Disempowered in the Palestinian Territories,” *Chatham House*, April 2, 2019, www.chathamhouse.org/2019/04/young-people-remain-disempowered-palestinian-territories.

and presidential elections, most recently in May 2021 under the pretext that Israel refused to allow Jerusalemite Palestinians to vote. He has marginalized all Palestinian political structures (PA, PLO, and Fatah) and concentrated political power, confining it to himself, which raises serious questions about the ability of Palestinians to ensure a smooth and calm leadership transition.

Ambiguous Legitimacies

Since the Palestinian political system was founded in the 1960s, the question of legitimacy has been an important concern. The groups and structures that legitimacy supposed to serve—be they Fatah, Hamas, or other parties; the PA or the PLO operate in the WB or the GS—have exhausted themselves. They are decaying and remain only metaphorically tied to the national struggle, as their strategies and programs increasingly fail to serve the national goals. Thus, they no longer hold the same standing among Palestinians as they did in the past.³⁶ Since 1993, the legitimacy of both the PLO and the PA and the extent to which they truly represent Palestinians have been questioned. Whereas the PA acquired its legitimacy through one presidential, two parliamentary, and several local elections, the PLO leadership has not been elected—which in a legal sense makes it not qualified to act as a representative of all Palestinians, as Alexander Kouttab and Mattia Toaldo argue.³⁷ The PLO is a body that has little to do with the daily concerns of the Palestinians who live in the WB and the GS. Yet even though its influence has rapidly declined, the PLO's leadership unceasingly asserts that it is the sole representative of all Palestinians and that it has the right to govern, monopolize negotiation with Israel, and conduct foreign relations.

For years, Palestinians have run a divided and dysfunctional order that has suffered from institutional deterioration and autocracy—especially under Abbas, whose term has long expired. As the inoperative PLC has not met for over 14 years and no viable opposition exists, inefficiency, corruption,³⁸ and intolerance are on the rise, and accountability and the rule of law are weak. Service delivery and corruption are likely to remain less relevant as long as Palestinians are not given the opportunity to bestow legitimacy upon their governing body. Public opinion polls have consistently shown that the prevailing corruption is generally correlated with stagnation, the absence of political mobility, malrepresentation, and deficient legitimacy, while the unfinished task of national liberation carries considerable weight as well.³⁹

Hamas officially entered the political scene in 2006, when it replaced its strategy of electoral boycott, adopted in 1996, with participation.⁴⁰ But when Hamas won the 2006 parlia-

³⁶ See Majed Kayali, "The Stalemate in the Palestinian Political System," *Middle East Monitor*, July 28, 2015, www.middleeastmonitor.com/20150728-the-stalemate-in-the-palestinian-political-system/.

³⁷ Alexander Kouttab and Mattia Toaldo, "In Search of Legitimacy: The Palestinian National Movement 20 Years after Oslo," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 2013, www.files.ethz.ch/isn/173564/ECFR89_PALESTINE_BRIEF_AW.pdf.

³⁸ Elliott Abrams, "Corruption in the Palestinian Authority," *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 5, 2018, www.cfr.org/blog/corruption-palestinian-authority.

³⁹ See Palestinian public opinion polls at: Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, www.pcpsr.org/en/search-data-files.

⁴⁰ Frode Løvlie, "Explaining Hamas's Changing Electoral Strategy, 1996–2006," *Government and Opposition* 48:4 (2013), www.cmi.no/publications/4482-explaining-hamass-changing-electoral-strategy.

mentary elections, deemed open and fair by international observers, its elected officials were imprisoned and boycotted by both local and international players. The party insisted that it had the legitimate mandate to rule, based on the election victory and on the conviction that its ideology and tactics would lead to true independence and eventually form a valid alternative to the PA/PLO approach. Currently, Fatah acquires its legitimacy through institution-building and governance, processes that it believes will lead to independence and statehood, whereas Hamas acquires its legitimacy through opposing the OA and its (deceptive) promises, advocating resistance—both armed and unarmed—instead. But neither Hama nor Fatah has obtained the desired goal of national independence, whether through resistance or state-building.⁴¹

For the leadership of Fatah or Hamas to regain legitimacy among Palestinians, two inter-related challenges must be overcome: the internal division and the occupation. This requires, first, counteracting political apathy, despair, and alienation among Palestinians, which cannot be achieved if factional divisions continue to overwhelm the quest for statehood. Second, it necessitates developing clearer and more effective strategies to counter Israeli measures. Thus, the political system needs to initiate a process of consensus-building or forge a social contract that reflects the general will of the Palestinians and determines who should govern and how.⁴² This requires a nationwide dialogue to resolve all stumbling issues. Key concerns include: ending the Fatah–Hamas split; defining the conditions necessary for a long-term agreement that defines how power can be shared among the various groups; reintegrating all Palestinians locally and abroad; redefining the relationship between the PLO and the PA after the failure of the Oslo promise; reassessing the relationship with Israel; and agreeing on who the external and internal foes are.

New elections might bring greater clarity regarding who has the legitimacy to rule and who shall succeed President Abbas.⁴³ But merely holding elections might further polarize the various parties, unless they can agree on fundamental rules regarding the national project, particularly how to reconcile the two opposing narratives of governance and resistance and how to make them serve the national aspirations. Moreover, it must be decided whether elections should be held only for the PA or also for the PLO—the latter option being largely unfeasible from a logistical and political standpoint. Moreover, without a genuine agreement between Fatah and Hamas on the grand rules of political coexistence and partnership, elections would lead to a repetition of past mistakes rather than resolving the question of legitimacy, regaining the trust of their constituencies, and serving national aspirations and independence. There is a real threat, as Omar Rahman argues, that the prevailing divisions could “liquidate the Palestinian national movement, [a threat that] doesn’t come from Israel or the United States, but from the failure of its leadership.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ See Nathan J. Brown, “A False Road to Statehood,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, August 22, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77048>.

⁴² Nijmeh Ali, “The Question of Palestinian Representation: Elections vs. Consensus Building,” in *Reclaiming the PLO, Re-Engaging Youth*, ed. Marwa Fatafta and Alaa Tartir, Al-Shabaka (August 2020), 10–14, <https://al-shabaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PLO-Report-EN-2.pdf>.

⁴³ Mkhaimar Abusada, “Palestinian Elections and the Need for Political Change,” *The Washington Institute*, March 1, 2021, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/palestinian-elections-and-need-political-change.

⁴⁴ Omar Rahman, “The Real Threat to Palestine Is a Crisis of Leadership,” *Brookings*, February 13, 2020, www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/02/13/the-real-threat-to-palestine-is-a-crisis-of-leadership/.

The Fatah– Hamas Split

Traditionally, the various Palestinian factions have never held coherent, unified positions; moderate and radical views have existed side by side. Thus, the split between Hamas and Fatah that began in July 2007 is not the first—but it differs in terms of magnitude and intensity.⁴⁵ Its roots lie in accumulated political and ideological differences and in the approaches adopted in service of these differences. In particular, Fatah's initiation and extended efforts to facilitate the OA were opposed by Hamas from the outset, as the party initially refused to participate in the political processes of the PA. However, when in 2006 Hamas decided to enter the political system, its election victory of the following year was not acknowledged by local players and boycotted by the international community. Hamas reacted by taking over the GS by force.⁴⁶ The most tangible manifestation of the split is the creation of two opposing orders with different structures, agendas, priorities, and perspectives on almost all domestic challenges and the so-called peace process.

Ultimately, the split has allowed both parties to put into practice their respective agendas without having to fear interference from the other side. Abbas could no longer be held responsible by Israel for Hamas's militant approach, and he was relieved of what he considered Hamas's "radical" demands, given a free hand to move forward in his negotiation approach.

With time, the split hardened the stances of both parties, deepening their discontent and augmenting difficult questions regarding their respective legitimacy. Hamas bases its claim to the right to govern on winning the 2006 election and on Islamist ideology.⁴⁷ Fatah builds its claim on its revolutionary past and on being the party that initiated the OA and founded the PA. Each side considers the other an obstacle to Palestinian independence, and both sides are certain that they are moving in the right direction.

Increasingly, the split has weakened and caused trouble for both authorities.⁴⁸ The PA in Ramallah found itself exposed to enormous political and economic pressures, as many of its Palestinian constituency had to lower their expectations and objected to Abbas's strategy of moving the conflict resolution efforts to international organizations. In the GS, Israel persists in frequently targeting not only Hamas' military capabilities but also civil facilities to instigate public discontent.⁴⁹ Israel aims to validate the claims that Abbas is weak and impotent and that Hamas is a terrorist group that should be boycotted. Through harsh policies towards both sides, Israel has exerted control over the power dynamics between Fatah and Hamas, increasing their weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

⁴⁵ Basem Ezbi, *Al-inqisam al-filastini: juthur at-tashziy wamutatalabat al-takhati* (The Palestinian Division: The Roots of the Fracture and Requirements for Repair), *Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi*, December 2015.

⁴⁶ Basem Ezbi, *Hamas wal-Hukum: Dukhoul al-Nizam am al-Tamrrod alayh* (Hamas and Governance: An Entry into the Political System or a Rebellion Against It?), Ramallah: The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 2010.

⁴⁷ Basem Ezbi, "Democracy as a Minor Necessity in Hamas's Narrative," in *Popular Protest in the New Middle East: Islamism and Post Islamist Politics*, eds Basem Ezbi and Are Knudsen (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

⁴⁸ Jonathan Cook, "Hamas and Fatah: Why the Two Groups Are Failing," *Aljazeera*, May 12, 2018, www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/hamas-fatah-groups-failing-180512082001713.html.

⁴⁹ Murtaza Hussain, "Israel Killed up to 192 Palestinians in May 2021 Attacks on Gaza," *The Intercept*, December 9, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/12/09/israel-attacks-gaza-palestine-civilians-killed/>.

A divided enemy best serves Israel's colonial interests. While Gaza remains severely isolated, the PA in Ramallah must remain silent on the occupation or risk losing its financial backing. This situation enables Israel to avoid any serious negotiations under the pretext that Abbas is weak and Hamas a terrorist group, and that both parties are unfit for peace—while negotiations have neither stopped Israeli settlement expansion nor brought back refugees and failed to achieve peace, prosperity, or even stability, as Palestinian land is increasingly fragmented. Oslo's aftermath is tearing the Palestinians apart on most of the issues that traditionally have been pillars of their politics, leaving initiatives on the ground completely in the grip of the Israeli occupation.

Numerous unsuccessful efforts have been made since 2007 to tackle the split,⁵⁰ but mistrust and disagreement run deep, as both parties are at odds over fundamental political and ideological questions. The challenges and priorities posed by their dissimilar constituencies have only increased inherent disparities. Currently, differences revolve around not only the OA but also the security collaboration between Ramallah and Israel, the reconstruction of Gaza, and the reforming of the PLO in a manner that would accommodate Islamists, including Hamas.⁵¹ During the Arab revolts an agreement was signed, mainly because the two parties felt uncomfortable remaining at odds when the Arab streets were uniting in their demand for liberty, dignity, and justice. But its implementation quickly stalled.⁵² As Fatah is bound to a negotiated solution—achieved peacefully, as frequently stressed by Abbas—and Hamas remains committed to resistance, both parties are convinced that they should rule the Palestinians alone, at least to the extent possible under occupation. Both parties consider their strategy as a source of legitimacy and are unlikely to change course. Thus, even a “successful” reconciliation would most likely result in merely an uneasy coalition; compromise is difficult to conceive of, and chances for the survival of any future reconciliation remain slim.

The Deepening of the Split

When Fatah realized that it could not achieve independence, the movement turned away from a strategy of institution-building and resorted to mustering financial support from the international community and international organizations such as the UN Security Council and General Assembly and the Human Rights Court instead. The PA joined international protocols and organizations, beginning with the Fourth Geneva Convention and the International Criminal Court (ICC). This strategy has gone hand in hand with a policy of preserving “law and order,” which did not exclude the repression of the opposition, mainly Hamas.

Desiring to contain the negative repercussions of the split, the PA has focused on strengthening Abbas' leadership through a tripartite alliance that includes the political, economic,⁵³

⁵⁰ Khaled Elgindy, “The Palestinian Leadership Crisis,” *Brookings*, January 5, 2016, www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/01/05/the-palestinian-leadership-crisis/.

⁵¹ Ezbidi, “The Palestinian Division.”

⁵² United Nations, “Agreement between Fatah and Hamas, Cairo, 3 May 2011,” https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/OPt_AgreementFatahHamas2011.pdf.

⁵³ This elite includes the Palestinian capitalists who came from abroad after the establishment of the PA and the local capitalists. This group exercised their economic activities within the framework of the Paris Protocol (1994) and were able, with the support of the PA, to capture exclusive monopolies in areas such as oil, cement, steel, and the communications sector. This class also controlled all banks

and security elites.⁵⁴ With international assistance flowing, the purchasing power of segments of Palestinian society has risen. Most people in the WB are now preoccupied with paying off loans that are granted easily and abundantly in line with efforts to transform the WB and GS through neoliberal policies, enhance people's acceptance of the status quo, and convert the conflict into an order of "peace and prosperity."⁵⁵ Israel, international stakeholders, and the Oslo-generated or Oslo-enhanced elites have been able to employ mechanisms of reward and control, demoting and excluding opponents. The formation of international, local, and regional partnerships has benefited these elites considerably. The defense of the so-called peace process therefore guards their interests.

Thus, the entity in the WB is not ruled according to sound principles. Important positions are filled or reshuffled, exerting hidden pressure, to serve certain individuals or groups, which has led to increasing political and administrative corruption. Authoritarianism and securitization are affecting government institutions' function and encourage personalized authority in defiance of a modern institutional system where legal and professional norms are applied and upheld.⁵⁶

The Hamas-led entity in Gaza has fared no better than the Fatah-backed PA in Ramallah.⁵⁷ Although Hamas has stood out since the 2007 split for its ability to maintain its power and effectiveness and has remained relatively united and cohesive, the implementation of its strategy has not been unproblematic. After a decade of rule, having encountered the limitations and challenges that go with governing—while having to withstand frequent Israeli attacks—Hamas is implicitly reconsidering and adapting its strategy of armed resistance. The movement realizes that such resistance is not always harmonious with the corollaries of governing the impoverished and blockaded GS, where conditions have not allowed Hamas to credibly deliver on either national liberation or services and stability. Resistance aims to defend Palestinians whereas governance includes restraining the population in the quest to uphold law and order, and Hamas has not shied away from imposing coercive measures on the people of

operating in the West Bank and the GS, and benefited tremendously from the economic liberalization policy adopted between 2007 and 2013 under Salam Fayyad's government.

⁵⁴ On this front, a body called the US Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority (USSC) was created in March 2005 to help the Palestinians reform their security services. It was tasked with establishing a body that could coordinate various international donors under one plan of action and mobilize resources, while at the same time dispelling Israeli fears regarding the capabilities of the PA Security Forces (PASF). Its mission also includes advising the PA on right-sizing its forces, restructuring and training these forces so that they can enforce the so-called rule of law, and making them accountable to the government; see Keith Dayton, "Peace through Security: America's Role in the Development of the Palestinian Authority Security Services," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 7, 2009, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/peace-through-security-americas-role-development-palestinian-authority-security.

⁵⁵ Bill Crane, "How Neoliberalism Undermined Palestinian Liberation," a review of *Palestine Ltd.: Neoliberalism and Nationalism in the Occupied Territories*, Toufic Haddad (London: IB Tauris, 2016), in *International Socialist Review* 103 (Winter 2016/17), <https://isreview.org/issue/109/how-neoliberalism-undermined-palestinian-liberation>.

⁵⁶ Alaa Tartir, "Palestinians Have Been Abandoned by Their Leaders," *Foreign Policy*, May 24, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/24/palestinians-have-been-abandoned-by-their-leaders/>.

⁵⁷ Imad Alsoos and Nathan J. Brown, "Hamas: Constrained or Nimble?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 11, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/04/11/hamas-constrained-or-nimble-pub-76047>.

Gaza.⁵⁸ Similar to the PA in the WB, Hamas's rule has been charged with corruption, incompetence, and authoritarianism, but it carries the additional burden of isolation and frequent Israeli attacks. Against this backdrop, in 2017 Hamas produced a new leadership, modified its charter,⁵⁹ and expressed the willingness to adjust to internal Palestinian and regional political realities. Hamas had to find a solution to the same dilemma that Fatah faced when it agreed to participate in the Oslo process: prioritizing political strategy over resistance.

While isolation has allowed Hamas to deliberate, and even hold votes in Gaza, the movement has continuously encountered serious political and ideological challenges. Clear and undisputed strategies are missing, even though the Friday demonstrations,⁶⁰ held weekly from January 2018 to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted Gaza's plight and fostered international solidarity. Survival has become the main goal, as Gazans are suffering under Hamas' rule and internal repression and must cope with excruciating living conditions that include unemployment and poverty, while the reconstruction of damaged homes and infrastructure is hampered by the siege. Regarding armed struggle, diplomacy, and governance, Hamas has thus far been no more successful than Fatah.

As neither approach is bringing Palestinians closer to independence, the people are becoming increasingly unhappy with the "big two." A 2018 poll showed that both Fatah and Hamas are steadily losing popular support. More than 60 percent of the population demand the resignation of President Abbas, half of it views the PA as a burden, and three-quarters consider the current conditions worse than those before the Oslo Agreements.⁶¹ This high percentage of dissatisfied, disillusioned Palestinians constitutes a loud and powerful call for a new political leadership that can mobilize, unite, and lead to independence. But while both parties are tainted by their respective failures, other groups are unable to mobilize or unite Palestinians to bring about national liberation; Palestinians have not only one but two unsuccessful leadership positions.⁶² Neither President Abbas' strategy of pursuing negotiations and/or soliciting international support and engaging in security cooperation with Israel, nor Hamas' approach of armed resistance, has thus far succeeded in countering Israeli measures and policies, ending the occupation, or bringing about a Palestinian state.

⁵⁸ Jacob Eriksson, "Why Hamas Still Relies on Violent Oppression to Control Gaza," *The Conversation*, June 8, 2015, <http://theconversation.com/why-hamas-still-relies-on-violent-repression-to-control-gaza-42461>.

⁵⁹ Middle East Eye, "Hamas in 2017: The Document in Full," May 2, 2017, www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-charter-1637794876.

⁶⁰ In January 2018, a Palestinian journalist (Ahmed Abu Artema) called on Palestinian refugees to gather peacefully near the fence with Israel and attempt to return to their pre-1948 homes. This call led to weekly Friday protests, which became known as the "Great March of Return" rallies. Demonstrators demanded an end to Israel's 12-year-old blockade of the GS, and almost 270 protesters have been martyred—and thousands more wounded—by Israeli forces at areas near Gaza's security fence since the rallies began. See Bram Wispelwey and Yasser Abu Jamei, "The Great March of Return: Lessons from Gaza on Mass Resistance and Mental Health," *Health and Human Rights Journal* 22:1 (2020): 179–86, www.hhrjournal.org/2020/06/the-great-march-of-return-lessons-from-gaza-on-mass-resistance-and-mental-health/.

⁶¹ See Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, "Press Release: Public Opinion Poll 69," September 12, 2018, www.pcpsr.org/en/node/733.

⁶² Cook, "Hamas and Fatah."

The Hegemony of the Executive Authority

As the highest executive authority, PA president Mahmoud Abbas enjoys almost absolute power in running what Arthur M. Schlesinger termed an “imperial presidency.” Since the PLC stopped convening in 2007, President Abbas has consolidated his power by assuming the roles of both the executive and the legislative authorities, issuing legislation through presidential decrees, frequently in processes that lack transparency and proper consultation with the public. An example is the 2017 Palestinian cybercrime law that blatantly violates public freedoms, freedom of expression, and the right to privacy.⁶³ Even though the law was amended following public objection, it continues to allow authorities to block websites and conduct surveillance of any social media user. Palestinians can be arrested for expressing their political views and criticism online and charged with “cybercrimes,” punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

The executive authority’s realm extends to the judiciary. In April 2017, Palestinian judges, lawyers, and prosecutors protested a draft amendment that would have granted the Palestinian president the authority to appoint both the head of the High Judicial Council and the head of a committee that oversees judges while allowing for the early retirement of judges, opening the door for executive interference. Under such a provision, judges would not have been able to issue rulings that challenge or oppose the executive authority. An example of such executive pressure is the case of former Supreme Court Chief Justice Sami Sarsour, who had to sign an undated letter of resignation before he was sworn in.⁶⁴

The dysfunction of the PLC and the PNC has encouraged the monopoly of the executive authorities in signing secretly negotiated agreements with Israel on matters related to energy, electricity, water, and communications.⁶⁵ President Abbas failed to abide by formal processes and proceeded in the absence of consultation with the public, with profound political, economic, social, and environmental implications.

A 2016 study highlights the executive’s dominance and free hand in signing agreements and memoranda of understanding.⁶⁶ In September 2016, an electricity-related agreement that settled the PA’s outstanding US\$550 million debt to the Israeli Electric Corporation was signed between Israel and the PA.⁶⁷ The PA has kept this agreement confidential despite public demands to disclose its terms. Palestinian civil society, media, and electric companies want to know how the power to distribute electricity was transferred to the PA, how it was regulated, and what political implications it carries.⁶⁸

⁶³ Group 194, “Palestinian Authority Shows Its ‘Authoritarian’ Face through Cyber Crimes Law,” August 23, 2017, <http://group194.net/english/article/53439>.

⁶⁴ See the petition signed by a number of Palestinian human rights and civil society organizations: Aman-Transparency Palestine, “Towards Strengthening Independence of the Judiciary: Statement by Human Rights and Civil Society Organizations,” October 24, 2016, www.aman-palestine.org/en/activities/1152.html.

⁶⁵ Marwa Fatafta, “Neopatrimonialism, Corruption, and the Palestinian Authority: Pathways to Real Reform,” *International Middle East Media Center*, December 29, 2018, <http://imemc.org/article/neopatrimonialism-corruption-and-the-palestinian-authority-pathways-to-real-reform/>.

⁶⁶ Fatafta, “Neopatrimonialism.”

⁶⁷ Iyad Qatrawi, “Why Some Palestinians Don’t Trust New Electricity Deal with Israel,” *Al-Monitor*, September 23, 2016, www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/09/palestine-israel-electricity-deal-3g-debt.html#ixzz7JFd7ECZW.

⁶⁸ Qatrawi, “Why Some Palestinians Don’t Trust New Electricity Deal with Israel.”

Another example is the Red Sea–Dead Sea agreement that was signed by the PA, Jordan, and Israel, also in secret. Palestinian water and environmental experts protested, warning that the agreement would cause irreversible environmental damage if implemented, as it would destroy what little is left of the Dead Sea’s ecosystem. Palestinians protested the agreement also because it entrenches Israel’s denial of Palestinian rights to water, as it undermines Palestinian sovereignty over the WB, including over part of the Jordan River Basin. The PA, represented by the Palestinian Water Authority, excluded Palestinian experts from consultation and ignored their questions regarding the motivation for signing such an agreement that achieves very little for Palestinians.⁶⁹ Every Palestinian citizen, as a service recipient, has the right to know of such details. In the absence of basic transparency, Palestinians are denied their right to access information on the basic services their government delivers, which may prevent them from holding the PA accountable.

Unrestrained Security Forces

Both in the WB and in the GS, security forces frequently launch brutal crackdowns on peaceful demonstrators, using excessive force to disperse peaceful assemblies and detain participants.⁷⁰ In June 2018, “WB-based security forces quashed a demonstration by activists in Ramallah demanding that the Palestinian government lift the sanctions imposed on the Hamas-run Gaza Strip,” as Amnesty International cites in a report on a demonstration it had monitored, indicating that Palestinian security forces, many of them in civilian clothes, brutally attacked non-violent demonstrators and bystanders, using sound grenades, tear gas, and physical assault to disperse them.⁷¹ Amnesty International also highlighted gender-based violence and harassment practiced by security personnel.⁷²

Intolerant of media and journalists, security forces have not only attacked journalists but also prevented bystanders from taking photographs or videos of incidents.⁷³ A commission of inquiry established by the PA deemed the use of force by security forces unjustified and recommended several legal and policy measures to bring the regulations that govern the use of force by security forces in line with international standards.

The situation in the GS under Hamas’ control is no different, as public gatherings are prohibited and demonstrations suppressed. In June 2018, a demonstration organized by the

⁶⁹ Adnan Adwan, “The Strategic Risks of the ‘Bahrain Channel’ on the Palestinian Cause” (in Arabic), *Al-Wahda al-Islamiyya*, April 2015, www.wahdaislamyia.org/issues/160/aadwan.htm.

⁷⁰ Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, “Right to Peaceful Assembly under the Palestinian Authority,” no date, <https://pchrghaza.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/RIGHT-TO-PEACEFUL.pdf>.

⁷¹ See Amnesty International, “State of Palestine: Stop Use of Excessive Force, Arbitrary Detention and Torture against Peaceful Protestors,” June 22, 2018.

⁷² According to Amnesty International (AI) and Al Haq, women protestors were kicked by men in civilian clothes, grabbed by their breasts, and kicked in the crotch. An eyewitness said that on more than one occasion she was surrounded and chased by men wearing Fatah hats who were verbally harassing groups of women; AI reports that Palestinian human rights organizations and activists have also reported a number of incidents of sexual violence and harassment by Palestinian security forces against female demonstrators and bystanders. See Al-Haq, “Palestinian Security Forces and Agents Forcefully Disperse Peaceful Demonstrators in Ramallah,” June 15, 2018; Amnesty International, “State of Palestine.”

⁷³ Even Amnesty International staff members were threatened and surrounded by Palestinian security forces while trying to document the beatings of demonstrators; see Committee to Protect Journalists, “Palestinian Security Forces Assault at least 5 Journalists Covering Protest in Ramallah,” June 30, 2021.

Commission of Detainees and Ex-Detainees called for an end to salary sanctions on PA employees in the GS and for an end to the Palestinian political split. The protests were violently suppressed when men in civilian clothes—allegedly members of the Hamas security service—began to chant slogans against President Abbas to provoke demonstrators. The mounting tensions they caused led to beatings of demonstrators and journalists. Hamas security forces and police were present at the scene but failed to protect the protesters.⁷⁴

Furthermore, individuals in the GS have been sentenced and executed by what Hamas calls a “special field military court.” Serious questions are raised about these courts and whether they meet the minimum fair trial standards: Defendants are denied access to legal representation, subjected to ill-treatment and torture, and obliged to sign confessions under pressure, while sentences cannot be appealed, which places them in violation of Palestinian law.

Today, more than 83,000 security personnel are employed in the WB and the GS combined, forming one of the highest ratios of security personnel to civilians in the world.⁷⁵ In both entities, the security forces have become a tool in the hands of an authoritarian oligarchy that uses them to control and limit political participation and silence freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Security forces restrict freedom of movement and economic and social rights; they practice arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading measures—even killing PA opponent Nizar Banat in May 2021. Several laws and executive decrees were proposed to regulate the security forces.⁷⁶ Yet in practice, perpetrators are rarely held accountable.

Ineffective Political Parties

Most Palestinian political “parties” belong to the secular Palestinian movements that were created with the PLO in the 1960s, whereas the Islamic movements (Hamas and Jihad al-Islami) were established in the 1980s. The majority of these groups have a military and a political wing, and frequently it is difficult to distinguish between their respective positions. Even though there exists a fairly large number of these “parties,” two groupings enjoy prominence: the PLO, led by Fatah, and the Islamists, led by Hamas. Thus far, no other independent group has been able to seriously challenge them. The smaller parties remain weak and rigid, with antiquated structures and outdated political and ideological narratives, which fits poorly with the fast-changing developments on the ground, both internally and globally. As the smaller parties lack the material and symbolic resources that are required to meet the growing needs of the various segments of society, particularly youth and women (such as social welfare, employment opportunities, and education), and without the potential to grant privileges or achieve national goals, they are incapable of breaking the monopoly of Fatah and Hamas and their policies, and even incapable of competing with civil society groups. An opinion poll released in December 2018 showed that in potential legislative elections, 34

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Alaa Tartir, “The Palestinian Authority Security Forces: Whose Security?” *Al-Shabaka*, May 16, 2017. <https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/palestinian-authority-security-forces-whose-security/>.

⁷⁶ Alaa Tartir, “The Evolution and Reform of Palestinian Security Forces 1993–2013,” *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 4 (2015).

percent would have voted for Hamas, 35 percent for Fatah, and only 10 percent for all other parties combined.⁷⁷

Part of the dilemma for Palestinian political “parties” lies in their self-perception as mainly promoters of national liberation, while they have limited experience in electoral politics, civic engagements, and democratization. Moreover, all political parties must accommodate not only local members but also the members and leaders that reside in and operate from abroad. Due to the ambiguous condition in Palestine—neither an open national liberation struggle nor true statehood—political parties cannot effectively and coherently communicate their narratives to their constituencies or mobilize their limited resources to serve either their local or international constituencies.

The standing of Fatah and Hamas is weakened because they are now indistinguishable from their two respective physical entities, with their affiliates serving as the backbone of their bureaucracy. This weakness is perpetuated and exacerbated by limited legislative and administrative skills among the governing elites, rigid internal regulations, and personal patronage. For example, both parties reveal very little about their finances, alleged corruption, or the real reasons for the dismissal of some individuals, such as Mohammed Dahlan, whom Fatah ousted. While they claim to adhere to democratic values, genuine deliberations are not common inside these parties. Even when their higher bodies convene, as was the case with Fatah’s seventh congress in 2016,⁷⁸ such occasions serve merely to emphasize the ultimate authority of a small number of party leaders, or even the top leader. They rarely question policies or hold officials accountable for their failures.

The autocratic nature of Fatah and Hamas is in line with the general Palestinian political culture, described by some commentators as neo-patrimonial.⁷⁹ Political parties create the impression that a legal-rational system prevails, but the actual power rests with embedded patron-client relationships. Clientelism and personal loyalty to a leader are reinforced through a carrot-and-stick strategy by which he is able to exercise his power and appoint and dismiss, hire and fire, and forgive and reappoint. Many of this system’s attributes seem to exist in Palestinian political parties.

For political parties to regain their constituency’s (particularly youth’s) trust and confidence, serious changes must be made, which includes ending the internal split, devising plausible strategies to counter the debilitating policies of the Israeli occupation, interacting with issues of importance to the public such as the law of social security⁸⁰ and the cybercrime law of 2017,⁸¹ and adopting policies of real participative inclusion. Programs must include a position

⁷⁷ Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, “Public Opinion Poll No. (70),” December 27, 2018.

⁷⁸ Ahmad Melhem, “Abbas Comes out of Fatah Congress Stronger than Ever,” *Al-Monitor*, December 14, 2016.

⁷⁹ Helga Baumgarten, “Occupied Palestine between Neo-Patrimonialism (Fatah), Technocratic State-Building (Salam Fayyad), the Rule of Political Islam (Hamas), and Rents from the West and the East,” paper presented at the conference *The Transformation of Palestine: Palestine and the Palestinians 60 Years after the “Nakba,”* Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Berlin, March 8, 2010.

⁸⁰ Daoud Kuttub, “Social Security Law Leaves Palestinians Less than Secure,” *Al-Monitor*, October 18, 2018.

⁸¹ The President of the State of Palestine, “Law by Decree No. 10 of 2018 on Cybercrime,” 2018. <https://security-legislation.ps/sites/default/files/law/Law%20by%20Decree%20No.%2010%20of%202018%20on%20Cybercrime.pdf>.

on social and economic concerns that range from unemployment to women's rights, freedom of expression, and the much further-reaching question of dignified citizenship. Political parties must give the public substantive positions that can be translated into concrete allocations of resources, legislative initiatives, and responsive policies. Pressingly, the question of reform must guide internal debates about the political system, and responsiveness to people's aspirations, particularly to those of youth and women, must be increased.

To this end, the political parties must redefine their identity and determine whether they are national liberation entities, political parties, or both, and the ensuing consequences must be addressed, such as transparency, or resistance versus stability. The organizational and political boundaries between the political groups (mainly Fatah and Hamas) on the one hand, and the PA and the PLO on the other, must be clearly outlined—which cannot be fully addressed before the current political split is overcome. Also, the regulations and principles guiding the management of the internal affairs of political groups must be developed, and a new code of conduct must replace the personal patronage system that dominates their organization, particularly regarding decision-making and leadership succession.⁸²

In seeking to address these concerns, a bottom-up approach is unlikely to work without the consent of the leadership of the political groups. Such consent will only come as a result of further pressures that should be exerted, particularly by youth, by pointing out the potential benefits for all stakeholders. One issue that can be addressed as a starting point is ending the Fatah–Hamas split to develop the ground for consensual politics: a crucial prerequisite for the rehabilitation of the entire Palestinian political system, including the political parties.⁸³

CONCLUSION

A single study is unlikely to capture the essence of politics anywhere, but this task is all the more challenging when investigating the exceptionally distorted Palestinian politics. The challenge stems from the interplay of the varying, multiple, internal and external structural influences affecting it in a context of colonial domination that has persisted for decades. The challenge here is not the multiplicity of the factors affecting Palestinian politics but rather the fact that these factors weaken the national and democratic character of Palestinian politics. By virtue of these factors, Palestinian politics are being transformed from a space that seeks national liberation into a distorted, coercive semi-state that gives prominence to the authority and governance of the ill-fated PA, rather than to the core principles that could lead to emancipation from the colonial condition. Meanwhile, in the absence of reform, the political structures and institutions of both the PA and the PLO (and even the political parties) have become rigid, irresponsive, and not truly representative, which raises serious questions about their fitness to bring about an accountable political order. This is reinforced by the outside pressures that outweigh the free will of most Palestinians. Such pressures are exerted by Israel and external parties: Israel influences profoundly the environment (resources, elites, strategies, and policies) surrounding Palestinian politics and consequently the performance of the Palestinians

⁸² Aman-Transparency Palestine. "A Code of Conduct for Palestinian Political Parties and Factions" (in Arabic). No date.

⁸³ Omar Barghouti, *BDS: Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011).

in Ramallah and Gaza. Even financially, the PA has become inescapably reliant on Israel's collection of tax revenues on its behalf, as stipulated by the Paris economic protocol, which the Palestinians are unable to amend even though it is a notoriously unbalanced agreement.

The internal weakness and split of the Palestinians is even more dangerous, as without it these external pressures against the Palestinians would not succeed. This weakness is manifested in the absence of a consensus among Palestinians on a clear strategy vis-à-vis the conflict with Israel that would enable them to encounter the Israeli settlement policies, confiscation of land, Judaization of Jerusalem, and silent annexation of the so-called Area C that constitutes 60 percent of the West Bank. The Palestinian failure in accommodating their own political and ideological differences has not only resulted in a fragmentation of their national politics but also transformed the logic of the conflict from a struggle against Israeli colonialism to an internalized struggle among the Palestinians over a doomed authority. Yet, the split between Fatah and Hamas is not the only manifestation of internal Palestinian ills; there are challenges that are no less important, such as the awkwardly ambiguous relationships between the weak PA and the aging PLO and between the Palestinians residing in historical Palestine and those living abroad.

These challenges must be addressed, as they affect the prospects for emancipation and the chances of establishing a system of government that safeguards democratic principles and values, human rights, and human dignity. If these challenges are not seriously addressed then Palestinian politics will continue to be conquered by difference and disagreement rather than a certain level of consensus and harmony, which will yield more fragmentation and discontent. Also, the absence of inclusiveness will continue to reinforce the illegitimacy of the existing structures of the PA and the PLO and will pave the way for an authoritarian order that reproduces injustices of colonialism.

The confusion and vulnerability of Palestinian politics will continue to raise questions for researchers and experts on Palestine. Three of these are: First, how could Palestinian politics become truly reflective of the aspirations towards liberation and emancipation? Second, how could it become compatible with the ideals of sound governance? Finally, what should Palestinian politics do in order to have sway over future solutions to the conflict with Israel, whether it is a one-state, two-state, or other solution? Such questions are uneasy but answerable because Palestinian politics are elastically broad enough and able to accommodate new directions. While Palestinians are confined by narrow sovereignty and broad external intervention, their political landscape remains free from the rigid and costly constraints of the nation-state that still does not exist—which should facilitate a reassessment of the underpinnings of the Palestinian politics and their future prospects.

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21. International talks in the Syrian conflict: a continuation of war by other means?

Bente Scheller

INTRODUCTION

Observers of the war that has devastated Syria over the past ten years often found a silver lining in the beginning of each round of international peace conferences: ‘At least they are talking’ was a common comment in media, heard nearly as often as the underlining that there was no alternative to the peace process: ‘there is no military solution.’¹

Ending the violence was important from the very beginning of the Syrian revolution, given the armed response with which the Syrian regime tried to counter the peaceful protests in March 2011. Six months into the conflict, several initiatives to find a solution were launched by different international actors. There was the Arab League’s Peace Plan, which the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad accepted in November 2011, followed by mediation efforts of the same body until February 2012, and Kofi Annan’s ‘Six Point Plan’, accepted by Assad in March 2012.² In June 2012 the first UN-led talks were held in Geneva to address the conflict, and continued as Geneva II in 2014 and Geneva III in 2016. In 2017, a series of intra-Syrian talks as part of the Geneva Format took place. In parallel, in February 2017 Russia initialized a series of conferences among Russia, Turkey and Iran in Astana, and a ‘Syrian National Dialogue’ meeting with 1,500 participants was convened in 2018 in Sochi as part of a Russian initiative.³

Despite all these efforts, neither the conflict itself nor any other single issue has been resolved. The grievances that fuelled the Syrian uprising – injustice, blatant corruption and state abuse of power – have increased. More than half of the population has fled the country or become internally displaced; more than 100,000 citizens have been forcibly disappeared and thousands tortured to death, with the regime being not the only actor yet clearly the one most dominant in perpetrating mass atrocities and crimes against humanity.

The regime has gradually reasserted its grip over the major cities of Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus, including surrounding coastal areas, as well as Syria’s south, and it has done so

¹ Deutsche Welle, ‘Pinheiro: “There Is No Military Solution in Syria”,’ 17 September 2012, www.dw.com/en/pinheiro-there-is-no-military-solution-in-syria/a-17098391 is only one example; see also Emile Hokayem (@emile_hokayem), ‘1. “There is no military solution for the Syrian crisis: — worst, most repeated, least accurate line. 2. You wouldn’t know from this statement who is doing the bombing or causing the crisis,” Twitter, 23 February 2020, https://twitter.com/emile_hokayem/status/1231401176907862018.

² Reuters, ‘Text of Annan’s Six-Point Peace Plan for Syria’, 3 April 2012, www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-ceasefire-idUSBRE8330HJ20120404.

³ Deutsche Welle, ‘Russia-Backed Syria Peace Conference in Sochi Gets Off to Rocky Start’, 30 January 2018, www.dw.com/en/russia-backed-syria-peace-conference-in-sochi-gets-off-to-rocky-start/a-42371799

mostly through military power and at times ‘local ceasefires’, which those subjected to them have described as ‘forced surrender’ or ‘capitulation’.⁴ Open military conflict is now restricted to only one major front, Idlib. However, the war is not yet over, since Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has vowed to take back every inch of Syrian territory.⁵ Life quality has deteriorated in all of Syria due to destruction, the economic crisis and Covid-19. Insecurity, both in the military sense and related to health and nutrition, is a facet of the political and economic crisis into which Syria continues to descend.

So why have all the above-mentioned international efforts failed, not only in terms of ending the conflict but also in terms of improving life and humanitarian conditions for Syrian citizens? In an article written in 2016, Ingrid Habest already points to a problem of ill-intention: ‘[T]he road to peace in Syria is filled with those who wish to spoil it’, she wrote, referring to parties ‘excluded from the talks or with a counter-productive agenda’.⁶

The way in which the Syrian regime has participated in the different international fora to solve the conflict, and particularly its unwillingness to cease violence for the duration of talks, make it the main inside spoiler. In fact, its attitude to talks looks like a reversion of Prussian general Clausewitz’s dictum. The regime’s behaviour is raising questions about whether instead of considering ‘war as the continuation of policy by other means’, it rather makes use of negotiations in order to continue the war.

Violence peaked ahead of significant international talks, such as each round of Geneva talks in 2012, 2014 and 2016. This might be common in peace processes because parties try to establish facts in order to enhance their leverage in negotiations. Interestingly, statistical analysis of civilian casualties by perpetrator points to the regime and its allies as the actors most responsible for civilian casualties, not the opposition. The overall level of violence after the international talks remained higher than before.⁷ This suggests that the regime increased violence in order to be ‘rewarded’ for lowering it slightly, not making any real concessions yet constantly deteriorating the situation.

The coincidence of increased violence around negotiations and the fact that not even during the conferences would violence be halted weakened the opposition as a disadvantaged body; it divided the opposition’s followers as to whether or not to remain at the table and forced the international intermediaries to invest in managing this point instead of focusing on the purpose of the negotiations – a political solution – and distracted attention from transition of power to humanitarian affairs, diluting the essence of the process. This was particularly evident in the first three rounds of the Geneva Process. The so-called Astana Process under Russian leadership even looked to be tailored to cover and support military advances.

In this chapter, I look at theories of spoilers in international talks and how they help to understand the Syrian context. In doing so, I examine existing literature on spoilers in peace processes to understand goals and strategies of the regime and its backers, as well as opportunities the process offered to them. What can we learn from the nexus between diplomatic

⁴ Fadi Adleh and Agnes Favier, ‘“Local Reconciliation Agreements” in Syria: A Non-Starter for Peacebuilding’, European University Institute, June 2017, DOI: 10.2870/240611.

⁵ SANA, ‘President al-Assad’s Speech at the People’s Assembly’, 8 June 2016, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=79616>.

⁶ Ingrid Habets, ‘Obstacles to a Syrian Peace: The Interference of Interests’, *European View* 15:1 (2016): 77–85.

⁷ Nadine Elali and Bente Scheller, Unpublished Paper, 2022.

efforts and military action in Syria? What does this suggest for the future of conflict resolution in Syria and possibly other contexts?

Many of the conditions that make success of negotiations unlikely can easily be identified in the Syrian case. The complex nature of the war is one, the custodians' constellation another: '[I]nternational consensus about norms, coordination behind a strategy of aggressive management of spoilers, and unambiguous signals to peace supporters and spoilers provide the difference between successful and failed implementation of peace agreements', as Stedman has argued.⁸ All of these can be confirmed in the case of Syria. Therefore, a discussion about what to do to fix the process should tackle the problem of division among the member states of custodians – international actors overseeing the implementation of peace agreements – and particularly when members of custodian states are not only patrons but warring parties themselves.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Quite a wide range of recent academic literature has been dedicated to 'spoilers' in peace processes, including Stephen John Stedman's groundbreaking article 'Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes'.⁹ Initial parties to a conflict, upon signing on to an agreement or pact, might become spoilers, undercutting the very same process they initially decided to become part of. 'Spoilers exist only when there is a peace process to undermine, that is, if at least two warring parties have committed themselves publicly to a pact or have signed a comprehensive peace agreement.'¹⁰ According to Stedman, spoilers pose the greatest risk to a process. They fear that negotiations pose a threat to their power, worldview or interests, and resort to violence to prevent this.¹¹ He suggests a typology of spoilers: total, greedy or limited, depending on their goals. All spoilers are interested in power. Limited ones may be willing to share power; total ones are the most extreme type and thus the most difficult when it comes to making concessions. Greedy spoilers lie in between and adjust the goals based on cost-risk calculations.¹²

While their motivations might be different from each other, he writes: 'Total spoilers are irreconcilably opposed to any compromise peace; any commitment to peace by a total spoiler is tactical – a move to gain advantage in a struggle to the death.'¹³ In terms of dealing with them, he adds there is no way of constructively engaging with them: 'Total spoilers cannot be accommodated in a peace settlement; they must be defeated or so marginalized that they can do little damage.'¹⁴ Less prone to follow incentives, he warns against threatening coercion if the custodians of the process are not willing to carry it through: 'Coercive diplomacy is unlikely to succeed, given the cost insensitivity of total spoilers; they call bluffs and test will.

⁸ Stephen John Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes', *International Security*, 22:2 (1997): 7.

⁹ Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems', 7.

¹⁰ Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems', 7.

¹¹ Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems', 5.

¹² Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems', 11.

¹³ Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems', 11.

¹⁴ Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems', 14.

If custodians fail to carry through on threats or fail to establish escalation dominance, the spoiler's position may be strengthened.¹⁵

Kelly M. Greenhill and Solomon Major, in their 'The Perils of Profiling', point to gaps and flaws they identify in Stedman's theory, such as the focus on individual decision makers. Instead of focusing on the individual actor, they suggest concentrating on 'prevailing opportunity structures and the relative power of parties'¹⁶ and contest the notion that actors are defined by their goals. According to them, it is rather the opportunities offered in the process that shape spoilers' goals. Greedy spoilers, as Stedman calls them, might maintain their preferences yet adapt their goals to what is realistic to reach within the process.¹⁷

Greenhill/Major disagree with the typology of spoilers Stedman suggests; both agree, however, on the importance of the custodians when it comes to the process and the different means they have at hand for the management of spoiler behaviour. Custodians could induce a change in the behaviour of the spoiler or resort to coercion or punishment to reduce the capacity of the spoiler to damage the peace process.¹⁸ Of fundamental importance for this is a coherent strategy for protecting peace: 'The crucial difference between the success and failure of spoilers is the role played by international actors as custodians of peace. Where custodians have created and implemented coherent, effective strategies for protecting peace and managing spoilers, damage has been limited and peace has triumphed. When international custodians have failed to develop and implement such strategies, spoilers have succeeded at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives.'¹⁹ Greenhill and Major consider different constellations according to the strength of both spoilers and custodians. According to them, a weak opposition party in combination with a weak custodian is most likely to produce a greedy spoiler.²⁰ This is also mentioned in Wendy Pearlman's analysis of spoilers in the Middle East Peace Process: 'Power imbalances, however, do more than restrain or liberate would-be spoilers. They also shape their incentives for acting as spoilers in the first place.'²¹ Stedman adds a further risk factor regarding custodian 'member states that are patrons of the spoiler'²² – a constellation that we find in the case of Syria in an intensified manner, as will be detailed below.

In the following, I will take relevant concepts from the writing of Stedman and Greenhill and Majors and compare them with the case of Syria. Given its military supremacy, the Syrian regime and its allies have been the main power delaying and derailing negotiations as well as sidelining the UN with other processes; hence I will focus on them even though other parties both in and outside the process may have acted as spoilers as well. With the special constellation of the Russian government being part of all international negotiation formats – Geneva, Vienna, Astana, and Sochi – and not only a patron but a party to the war in Syria, special

¹⁵ Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems', 15.

¹⁶ Kelly M. Greenhill and Solomon Major, 'The Perils of Profiling: Civil War Spoilers and the Collapse of Intrastate Peace Accords', *International Security* 31:3 (2006): 8.

¹⁷ Greenhill and Major, 'The Perils of Profiling', 2.

¹⁸ Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems', 12.

¹⁹ Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems', 6.

²⁰ Greenhill and Major, 'The Perils of Profiling', 15.

²¹ Wendy Pearlman, 'Spoiling Inside and Out. International Political Contestation and the Middle East Peace Process,' *International Security* 33:3 (2008/9): 82.

²² Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems', 16.

attention will be dedicated to the questions of which goals Russia pursued in its different roles and what impact this may have on the way negotiations are conducted.

GOALS

Given the discussion and lack of clarity about spoiler types (total, greedy or limited is what Stedman suggests), I focus on what is at the heart of this concept: the spoilers' goals. The clearest goal of the Syrian regime has been its own survival, which it seeks by any means, reflected from the beginning in the graffiti the Syrian soldiers would leave in places devastated by the army: 'Assad or we burn the country.' 'Total spoilers often espouse radical ideologies; total power is a means for achieving such goals as the violent transformation of society',²³ Stedman writes. While the regime does not follow or promote a radical ideology, over the course of the conflict the regime has worked on and praised a radical transformation of society among the sub-goals to reach its overall one.

Figures on Syria's demographics might be debatable. However, as part of Columbia University's Gulf Maps Project, Michael Izady published statistics according to which the distribution among Syria's different religious sects changed significantly between 2010 and 2018. Sunnis, previously forming the population's majority, are according to him now the largest minority, at 48.9 per cent, while the Alawites' share has increased from 11.8 to 17.2 per cent.²⁴ It might be difficult to establish reliable figures; however, with most of the 5.6 million registered refugees in Syria's neighbouring countries being Sunni Muslims, Syria's demographic composition has definitely changed in favour of Alawites.

With the strategies of siege, starvation and eventually surrender, followed by mass displacement, the regime has particularly changed the demographics around the capital, Damascus, where entire cities have been depopulated.²⁵ The same holds true for quarters of Homs and Aleppo. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians were forcibly moved from their hometowns and barred from return, their properties destroyed or confiscated.²⁶ This means they will be permanently displaced: either forced to settle in other areas of the country – thereby affecting demographics there – or to remain outside. Especially for the millions of Syrians stuck in neighbouring countries, this leaves them in a tragic limbo. Experience with previous mass displacements, particularly of Palestinians, has made Lebanon particularly perceptive to the risks for its own carefully calibrated system. Even though they live in dire conditions, not many Syrians have volunteered to return – yet even among the few who have, the regime has made a point of not accepting them: according to Lebanese authorities, a mere 20 per cent were permitted to re-enter Syria.²⁷ In August 2017, Bashar al-Assad mentioned as an 'achievement'

²³ Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems', 11.

²⁴ Michael Izady, 'Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity', *Columbia University, Gulf 2000 Project: 2006–Present*, n.d., https://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Syria_Ethnic_Shift_2010-2018_lg.png.

²⁵ PAX, 'Siege Watch Project', n.d., <https://siegewatch.org/>, see dozens of places marked as 'depopulated'.

²⁶ Hassan Arfeh, 'The Institutionalization of Demographic Change in Syria', 4 April 2019, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-institutionalization-of-demographic-change-in-syria/.

²⁷ Jusoor for Studies Center, 'Refugees Return Initiatives: What Did They Achieve in 9 Months?' April 2019, www.jusoor.co/details/Initiatives-to-Return-Syrian-Refugees-What-have-they-achieved-in-nine-months-/490/en.

that Syrian society since the beginning of the conflict had ‘improved’: ‘Syria has lost its youth and infrastructure, but it has won a healthier and more homogeneous society in the real sense’, the Syrian state news agency SANA quoted him as saying.²⁸ Mass displacement was carried out by the regime at least until its victory over Ghouta in 2018. If we assume this was part of a strategy of demographic change, it could not have been implemented without the framework of war or as part of a UN-led negotiation, given that forced deportations are considered a war crime.

CUSTODIAN, PATRON, WARRING PARTY: RUSSIA’S ROLE

From the beginning, Russia was closely monitoring the situation in Syria. In September 2011 Russia sent its first mission to Damascus to talk to both the regime and the opposition, warning against a ‘Libya scenario’. Among the driving factors behind Putin’s engagement was an aversion to ‘regime change’, particularly if it might allow for more Western interference in the Middle East and, particularly, Syria. Relations between Russia, and before that the Soviet Union, and Syria were mainly good in times in which Syria was under pressure from the West – a pattern that now repeated itself. Thus, there was a direct interest in bolstering Moscow’s role in Syria, not only to protect the Syrian regime but also to enhance Russia’s power on the international level. As US expert Anna Borshchevskaya notes: ‘[T]he Kremlin did believe it was engaged in a great-power struggle with the West, but too few in the West had understood this.’²⁹

It is difficult, however, to be sure about the entire range of Russia’s aims and goals, possibly also because they have shifted over the course of the conflict. Some of the benefits of Russia’s involvement may have arisen as opportunities during the conflict itself, such as business opportunities in Syria.

Given that Russia, as Syria’s most important patron and the most powerful party involved in the war, has been a part of all international negotiation efforts as a custodian, one could assume that this gives it enough leverage to end the war – either through negotiations for which it would gain international recognition, or by finally tipping the balance of power in Syria to an extent that allows the regime to achieve its declared aim of re-conquering the entire territory. Therefore, it raises the question of whether it might be more favourable for Russia to drag the situation out as it is, and prolong both the war as well as the negotiations.

Diplomatic Cover

Russia has given the regime diplomatic cover from the beginning, to date vetoing – along with China – 16 resolutions in the UN Security Council. In others, it has softened the language, and in particularly tough ones it has prevented full implementation, often pointing to ‘different interpretation’ (for example, whether political transition starts or ends with Assad’s departure,

²⁸ SANA, ‘President al-Assad: Everything Related to the Destiny and Future of Syria Is a 100% Syrian Issue, Unity of Syrian Territory Is Self-Evident and Not Up for Debate’, 20 August 2017, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=112238>.

²⁹ Anna Borshchevskaya, *Putin’s War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America’s Absence* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 119.

when it comes to UN Resolution 2254 (2017)) or contesting and not accepting the findings of the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons.³⁰

Spoils of War

The Syrian war presented Russia with a formidable opportunity to get rid of a number of citizens whom it considered a threat at home, particularly ahead of the Olympic winter games in Sochi in 2014. Russia has a substantial Muslim population and a violent history of Islamist separatism in Chechnya (although these forces were successfully co-opted by Putin in 1999). While Russia blamed Turkey for allowing Islamist fighters to pass through into Syria, starting in mid-2013 and continuing through 2014 it found this quite useful, encouraging and enabling a number of suspected terrorists in Russian territories to travel via that route – a match made in hell, with the Syrian regime’s intentions of radicalizing the uprising and portraying dissent as terrorism.³¹ Alexander Bortnikov, director of Russia’s security service, FSB, stated in a security meeting that by 2015, 2,900 Chechnyans had left to fight in the Middle East.³²

For its permanent support, Russia was rewarded with a long-term contract for its naval base in Tartus. More valuable than this hitherto rather neglected base was the contract it gained for the Hmeimin air base. The contract for this was signed in August 2015; in return, a month later, Russia sent its air force to support the ailing Syrian aviation fleet. Never before had Russia had an airbase in the region which allowed for a much more powerful power projection than a naval base. This direct involvement led to a boost in Russian arms sales; according to an article in *The Guardian*, the Russian *Kommersant* newspaper was referring to a ‘marketing effect’ from the Syria campaign of which an increase in arms sales of \$6–7bn was expected.³³

Russia’s Military and Political Considerations

The most relevant year for Russia’s upgrading of its role was 2016. Its direct military involvement in September 2015 had turned the tide of the conflict in Assad’s favour, enabling the regime gradually to reconquer lost territories and reassert its influence in the country.

This emboldening of the Syrian regime and Russia’s direct role in the war created a difficult starting point for the Geneva III process in January 2016; it ended without achievement, and violence on the ground peaked. For several months, an ongoing diplomatic exchange between Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry seemed to hold a possibility for advancing the peace talks.

‘Between May 2016 and February 2017, the Geneva process was not “active” – Kerry and Lavrov were searching for a solution outside this framework; a ceasefire while joining forces to fight the IS with a joint command structure in Jordan. Even though the US elections campaign started, this continued and the Special Envoy was waiting for the outcome. There was an

³⁰ See OPCW, ‘Russian Federation Request for Circulation of a Document’, 26 April 2019, www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019/05/ec90nat41%28e%29.pdf.

³¹ CSIS, ‘Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria’, December 2017, www.csis.org/analysis/russian-speaking-foreign-fighters-iraq-and-syria.

³² Maria Tsvetkova, ‘How Russia Allowed Homegrown Radicals to Fight in Syria’, *Reuters*, 13 May 2016, www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/russia-militants/.

³³ Alec Luhn, ‘Russia’s Syria Campaign Leads to Arms Sale Windfall’, *The Guardian*, 29 March 2016.

expectation that their initiative would lead somewhere,' says Carsten Wieland, an expert and then-adviser to the Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. 'However, there was no awareness that in the future, the action would shift away from the US–Russia theatre to the Russian–Turkish theatre.'³⁴ This became possible because of a shift in Turkey's strategy away from supporting the rebels to concentrating on fighting for consolidation of Kurdish autonomy and agency.³⁵

With a lame-duck situation in the US in the end of 2016, Russia supported the military campaign for Aleppo: the watershed moment in the Syrian war. The campaign brought Syria's biggest city and pre-war industrial hub back under regime control. Under the eyes of the world, a combination of a prolonged siege and starvation campaign of East Aleppo and a brutal aerial campaign took place, which ended in December with capitulation and the forced deportation of those who had remained in East Aleppo. It was a devastating moment for rebels all over Syria, who had discovered that not even for a city as prominent as Aleppo would the international community step up its efforts and protect civilians. The campaign also eroded Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura's efforts further: the incredible suffering led him to deal with ever more humanitarian urgencies, distracting attention from the overall mandate of finding a political settlement for the conflict as such. 'All of a sudden, due to Russian pressure in Aleppo, everything was focused on how to get radical al-Nusra out of Aleppo and deliver humanitarian aid – this was meant to distract from the genuine tasks of the Special Envoy', Wieland recalls.³⁶

US President Obama had already shown only limited interest in the Middle East and Syria. However, after the election of Donald Trump, US engagement became even more rare and random. 'For the Special Envoy, this meant that all of a sudden, he was faced with Russia only; and Turkey. The US counterpart was absent, and this completely hampered the Geneva process.'³⁷

In this moment, Russia established a new format: the Astana Talks. Here, Russia would be the main custodian, deciding both on participants (which led to de facto exclusion of the United States) and on items to settle in its favour, rather than genuine negotiations. The first round took place in February 2017. Officially, Astana was described as 'complementary' to the Geneva Process; yet it is clear that this is where most important military strategies would be settled upon and implemented, with all the political ramifications thus entailed.

Only due to the personal engagement of UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres was at least a sub-element of the Geneva talks taken back under the Special Envoy's responsibilities: the Constitutional Committee that was established in 2019. From the original four 'baskets' that were intended in the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, only this remained, fully compartmentalizing the search for an overall solution to piecemeal items.³⁸

When Stedman writes about the risks of member states of a custodian being patrons of a spoiler, he notes: 'They may be slow to acknowledge that their client is acting as a spoiler.'³⁹ However, in the case of Syria, Russia as patron goes much further. There is no question as to

³⁴ Author's interview with Carsten Wieland, Berlin, January 2022.

³⁵ Lyse Doucet, 'Syria Peace Talks: Armed Groups Come in from the Cold,' *BBC*, 23 January 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-38712444.

³⁶ Author's interview with Carsten Wieland, Berlin, January 2022.

³⁷ Author's interview with Carsten Wieland, Berlin, January 2022.

³⁸ Author's interview with Carsten Wieland, January 2022.

³⁹ Stedman, 'Spoiler Problems', 16.

whether or not Russia acknowledges the spoiler's actions: it is actively supporting them, and acting as a spoiler itself.

Spoiler vs Patron and Vice Versa

Assad is dependent on Russia's support. None of the other allies and backers are able to deliver what Putin does, especially when it comes to the UN Security Council. At the same time, Russia is also in a way dependent on Assad. On the international level, what counts is that Russia has leverage over its client strong enough to influence Assad's actions and convince him to make concessions. The common goal of both is to avoid regime change and crush the uprising.

However, there has been an element of ambiguity in Russia's policy. As Borshchevskaya writes: 'Moscow clearly stood by Assad. Yet it simultaneously claimed it was not wedded to Assad – merely to a "legitimate government" in Damascus [...] This dual claim opened the door for an interpretation that it was possible to work with Moscow to remove Assad in the future.'⁴⁰ This might have been understood as a message not only to the world but also to Assad that he should not be too confident. Nevertheless, there have been a number of instances in which Assad apparently acted to ruin constructive initiatives on the international level, thereby acting against Russian interests, and others in which Russia has allowed third parties to attack regime institutions or take initiatives presumably harmful to regime interests.⁴¹

Most prominently, during the first day of the annual conference on 'Supporting the future of Syrian and the region' in Brussels in 2017, an important donor meeting through which Russia aimed to externalize the cost of the war, the Syrian regime carried out a chemical attack with sarin gas in the town of Khan Sheikhoun, making it evident that it was still in breach of the chemical weapons convention it had joined in 2013 as well as exposing the fact that it had not adhered to the Russian–US negotiated deal according to which its entire chemical weapons stock should have long been destroyed by then.⁴²

Another instance in which Assad openly contradicted Russian efforts was in Autumn 2018, after the regime and Russia successfully re-conquered three of the four previously designated "de-escalation zones". Russia tried to capitalize on this by circulating a new proposal on the international level. It tried to replace the Western conditionality of 'reconstruction in exchange for transition' to 'return of refugees in exchange for reconstruction'.⁴³ At the same time, the regime issued law no. 10 expanding the legal possibilities to confiscate absentees' property and thus raising the bar for return.

Russia, on the other hand, has not prevented air strikes on Syrian regime facilities and military in Syria. Since the beginning of the war, Israel has carried out hundreds of air strikes

⁴⁰ Borshchevskaya, *Putin's War in Syria*, 106.

⁴¹ See Alexander Bick, 'Assad the Spoiler: Russia's Challenge in Syria', *The Wilson Center*, 30 April 2020, www.wilsoncenter.org/article/assad-spoiler-russias-challenge-syria.

⁴² Martin Chulov and Kareem Shaheen, 'Syria Chemical Weapons Attack Toll Rises to 70 as Russian Narrative Is Dismissed', *The Guardian*, 5 April 2017, www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/04/syria-chemical-attack-idlib-province.

⁴³ Arshad Mohammed and Phil Stewart, 'Exclusive: Despite Tensions, Russia Seeks U.S. Help to Rebuild Syria', *Reuters*, 4 August 2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-syria-exclusive-idUSKBN1KO2JP.

in Syria. In 2017 the US carried out an air raid in retaliation for the Khan Sheikhoun attack,⁴⁴ and in late February of 2020 Russia did not prevent Turkey's operation 'Spring Shield', in which hundreds of regime soldiers died and air defence systems, helicopters and tanks were destroyed.

On a symbolic level, Russia acted against Syria in early 2019. On March 25, 2019, US President Donald Trump held a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in which he proudly presented a signed proclamation officially recognizing Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights, occupied since 1967. This move was rejected by a number of Arab leaders – among them adversaries of Assad – and described by the Syrian regime as a 'blatant attack' on Syrian sovereignty.⁴⁵

While Russia criticized the move, officially backing Syria's position,⁴⁶ just a few days later it returned the remains of Israeli soldier Zachary Baumel, missing in Lebanon since 1982 and recovered from Syria.⁴⁷ In exchange, two Syrian citizens were released from Israeli prisons (both declared they did not want to go to Syria); however, the timing of the move comes across as bizarre and without any tangible benefits for the regime.

This behaviour of ruining each other's initiatives might be driven by the interest especially of the regime to contest its sponsor and underline its own agency: 'Actors turn to negotiating or spoiling to contest both what a proposed settlement entails and who has the power to decide this and other matters on behalf of their community.'⁴⁸

With its intervention, Moscow assumed air supremacy over Syria, with the exception of areas east of the Euphrates, and established itself as the leading military force in the conflict. It hardly used its power to contain other regional players' ambitions, enforce any principles of non-violent conflict settlement or try to protect Syrian civilians. It has been involved in local-level negotiations, local ceasefires that often resemble forced capitulations; however, it has not been a guarantor of deals, all of which have been broken by the regime.⁴⁹ Instead, it allowed Iran, Turkey and Israel to fight out their competing interests militarily, while its air force launched a campaign targeting civilians.

Changing Opportunities During the War

Russia's engagement in Syria has been costly, yet at the same time offered some opportunities. Some of these benefits for Russia might have been negotiated between the two governments regardless of a war, such as the expansion of naval bases, investments and business oppor-

⁴⁴ Mark Katkov, Jessica Taylor and Tom Bowman, 'Trump Orders Syria Airstrikes after "Assad Choked Out the Lives" of Civilians', *NPR*, 6 April 2017, www.npr.org/2017/04/06/522948481/u-s-launches-airstrikes-against-syria-after-chemical-attack?t=1644582134514.

⁴⁵ Natasha Turak, 'Trump Officially Recognized Israel's Annexation of the Occupied Golan Heights. Here's What It Means', *CNBC*, 27 March 2019, www.cnn.com/2019/03/27/trump-officially-recognized-israels-annexation-of-golan-heights.html.

⁴⁶ Maxim A. Suchkov, 'Russia Weighs in on Trump's Golan Heights Decision', *Al-Monitor*, 25 March 2019, www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/03/russia-us-israel-golan-heights.html.

⁴⁷ BBC, 'Russia Helped Israel Recover Remains of Soldiers Missing since 1982', 4 April 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47806780.

⁴⁸ Pearlman, 'Spoiling Inside and Out', 79.

⁴⁹ Marika Sosnowski, 'The Trouble with Ceasefires', *Pursuit, the University of Melbourne*, 3 May 2018, <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/the-trouble-with-ceasefires>.

tunities and licences for exploitation of natural resources. Others are unlikely to have come about (air bases) or were possible exclusively in a situation of war (Syria as a weapons test ground; facilitating Russian arms sales as well as getting rid of radicals). These material reasons might not have been Russian goals at the beginning of the war; however, they might have been a disincentive to seriously work on a solution. Most relevant when it comes to Russia's geopolitical and strategic positioning beyond Syria itself, maintaining the war means maintaining the necessity of negotiation, which every time gives a stage to Russia on which it can wield its power and demonstrate its leverage: for example, in renewing the mandate for cross-border aid deliveries every year. 'Russia wants the Geneva Process to go on, but not to make any progress', Wieland says.⁵⁰ 'Russia wants a military solution disguised as a political one [...] This is the Astana-isation of Geneva', is expert Hassan Hassan's characterization of the establishment of the Astana Process.⁵¹

DO INTERNATIONAL TALKS ENHANCE VIOLENCE ON THE GROUND?

To overcome obstacles in peace processes, Greenhill and Major suggest focusing not so much on the spoiler's behaviour but on 'opportunity structures' by which custodians can alter spoiler behaviour: 'If custodians of the peace shift the prevailing opportunity structures in their favor, in most cases parties to the process will alter their policies accordingly.'⁵² In the case of Syria, however, Russia has been creating opportunities both inside and outside the process. Outside, it has allowed the regime to act with impunity and even provided support and help in continuing the war as a strategy. Within the process it has granted the regime the opportunity to remain involved and give the appearance of respecting the UN-led process without ever delivering.

Having shed light on what the regime and its main ally might have – in their logic – achieved during the war by banking on violence while not seriously negotiating, it is worth looking at what the violent fallout of negotiations might have been on the ground. A pattern familiar from other wars is that, ahead of negotiations, violence increases as different actors try to create facts by advancing as much as possible. When it comes to Syria, it is worth looking at and disaggregating the numbers of fatalities by perpetrator. While it is true that all armed factions in Syria have been killing civilians, not all have done so to the same extent. More than 95 per cent of fatalities have been caused by the regime and Russia.⁵³

Investigation of the type of weapon used – including chemical weapons and indiscriminate bombarding with barrel bombs in civilian neighbourhoods – as well as the choice of targets, which, on the regime/Russian side, included systematic and deliberate targeting of health and education infrastructure points to a determination of the regime to affect civilians.

This difference is also visible when it comes to violence in the context of negotiations. In a research project, the Heinrich Boell Stiftung (hbs) examined civilian fatalities by perpetrator in the five-day period leading up to each conference as compared to those in the five-day period after, relying on fatality data provided by the monitoring body Syrian Network for

⁵⁰ Author's interview with Carsten Wieland, January 2022.

⁵¹ As quoted in Doucet, 'Syria Peace Talks'.

⁵² Greenhill and Major, 'The Perils of Profiling', 36.

⁵³ Nadine Elali and Bente Scheller, Unpublished Paper, 2022.

Human Rights (SNHR), and compared it to a timeline of the diplomatic process collected from desk research and statistically analysed. This analysis strongly suggests (95 per cent validity) a systematic pattern of higher Russian and regime-inflicted civilian fatalities before conferences versus after. ‘The same test was applied to the data on civilian fatalities caused by opposition forces, and no correlation was found’, the authors of the unpublished report write.⁵⁴

This strategic use of violence, while not supporting talks in a constructive way, suggests that the purpose of doing more harm is not restricted to creating a more favourable position from which to start the talks, but seeks to thwart the whole process. It serves to reframe the talks’ content, away from a political solution and towards short-term humanitarian improvements.

An additional tool used to draw attention to the humanitarian situation was creating short-ages and hindering aid, thus weaponizing the sector against civilians. The regime deliberately destroyed health infrastructure and persecuted health workers, and imposed sieges on millions of Syrians. While in the few areas besieged by rebels or IS, the regime was able to deliver aid by plane, it completely controlled access to opposition areas and hindered aid deliveries. HBF’s research also studied the distribution of humanitarian aid and checked it against the timeline of negotiations. Here, the pattern based on the UN reports on aid deliveries looks different. There was a short-term increase of convoy deliveries before and after periods of international negotiations.⁵⁵

This would be an improvement. However, further research is required to be sure about the benefits, given the enormous discrepancy between needs and aid delivered. Given the long periods in between Geneva I, II and III in which there were significantly less convoys, it could also mean that a deterioration of the humanitarian situation in between was created in order to shift the discussion in or around the conferences from political transition to mainly humanitarian issues. The hard-to-bear reporting of death because of starvation in Madaya or the images from a seemingly endless crowd queueing for food in Yarmouk created pressure and underlined the need to work hard for a solution to the conflict; follow-up news on aid convoys helped the notion that there was room for negotiation, that something could in the end be achieved, ignoring the fact that the sieges should not have been imposed in the first place.

A QUESTION OF TIMING?

When is the time ripe for a settlement? Greenhill and Major point to timing and exhaustion as factors improving the chances for a settlement: ‘Many analysts believe that agreements are most apt to be accepted when the fighting has reached a “mutually hurting stalemate” (i.e. a situation in which both sides recognize that the cost of continued fighting will likely exceed the potential benefits).’⁵⁶ To understand the meaning of this point in the Syrian context, the precise setting needs to be looked at, particularly *how* external actors have engaged. The strongest inside party of the war is the regime, which, of all parties to the war, also has the strongest outside backers. These have supplied the regime with foreign fighters from different contexts. With the military advances of the Syrian opposition in 2012–13, the regime went on the defensive and its army decreased in number to such an extent that the London-based International

⁵⁴ Nadine Elali and Bente Scheller, Unpublished Paper, 2022.

⁵⁵ Nadine Elali and Bente Scheller, Unpublished Paper, 2022.

⁵⁶ Greenhill and Major, ‘The Perils of Profiling’, 11.

Institute for Security Studies assessed that in 2013 merely 50 per cent of the army was still there, and that in terms of loyalty, the regime could count on 25 per cent of them only.⁵⁷ This is when external actors stepped up their efforts, providing the regime with ground forces.

Iranian's Lebanese proxy Hezbollah gained an ever more important role, leading battles rather than simply participating. Hezbollah was more pragmatic and more strategic than the regime's army and militia. For it, a battle was meant to conquer and establish control; there is no record of Hezbollah looting (a specialty of the Syrian army soldiers) or massacres (carried out by the Syrian irregular forces, often referred to as Shabiha).⁵⁸ For civilians, however, sieges imposed or guarded by Hezbollah would become much more traumatic. The growing dependence on irregular groups when the regime sought to outsource payment for security granted a certain level of transfer of goods to besieged areas – overpriced; depending on connections, not needs; creating business opportunities for war profiteers but in the end saving lives. Places such as Madaya, however, were besieged with the help of Hezbollah, which was determined to win the war by any means – and less corrupt; so humanitarian suffering in this as well as other areas was driven to an extent that caused tens of citizens to die from starvation.

Apart from the cooperation with Hezbollah, Syria's main allies, Iran and Russia, brought in other allies. Iran recruited fighters from Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵⁹ This is why the regime, despite a high death toll among its own ranks as well as those of foreign fighters, was not easily exhausted. It lived off borrowed forces.

For the opposition, this was more difficult. Their Western supporters would be hesitant to send any significant material support at all. The Gulf states provided funding but no manpower; foreign fighters joining the conflict from all over the region, including from Europe, were more of a liability than a help because they created what democratic actors wanted to avoid at any cost, and what the regime wanted to provoke: radicalization that would discredit armed rebels in Western perceptions, and that was also not the preference of most Syrians.

The situation worsened in 2013–14 with the establishment of the Islamic State's 'caliphate'. IS was never part of the opposition but rather chose to infiltrate and conquer territories that the rebels had already taken from the regime. IS was more of a threat to the opposition than it was to the regime – which, in battles between rebels and the IS, would reliably bomb the rebels. As analyst Christoph Reuter describes it: 'IS had a kind of air force for hire.'⁶⁰

CEASEFIRES AS PART OF A MILITANT STRATEGY

There were a number of ceasefire attempts, all of which inspired hope that they could be the first steps to build confidence and allow for negotiations in good faith. None of the nationwide ceasefires included enforcement measures. Even those that seemed promising at first were quickly dismantled – unless they aligned with the regime's military strategy, in which case

⁵⁷ International Institute for Security Studies (IISS), 'Chapter 7: Middle East and North Africa', *The Military Balance*, 113:1 (2013), 353–414.

⁵⁸ Yassin al-Haj Saleh, 'The Syrian Shabiha and Their State', *Heinrich Boell Foundation, Beirut*, 3 April 2014, <https://lb.boell.org/en/2014/03/03/syrian-shabiha-and-their-state-statehood-participation>.

⁵⁹ Tobias Schneider, 'The Fatemiyoun: Afghan Fighters in the Syrian Civil War', *MEI*, October 2018, www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2018-11/PP11_Schneider.pdf.

⁶⁰ Christoph Reuter, *Die schwarze Macht. Der 'Islamische Staat' und die Strategen des Terrors* (Penguin, 2016): 173.

they would hold only for as long as this continued to be the case. On the local level, during the ceasefires the regime sought to undermine local governance structures in opposition-held areas through campaigns of targeted assassinations.⁶¹

Beginning in 2016, Russia started to get more involved in local negotiations. For that purpose, on 23 February 2016 Russia announced the establishment of the ‘Russia Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic’, located in the Hmeimin air base. Russia stressed that this was in accordance with agreements reached with the United States and that it would serve to facilitate negotiations between the Syrian regime and the opposition and organize humanitarian aid.⁶² Yet even at this level, what had been achieved would not be implemented. As Adleh and Favier write: ‘[I]t is worth noting that security and military actors have been dominant in local negotiations, as the main negotiators or decision-makers, guarantors or mediators. On many occasions, they have also been spoilers.’⁶³

The best examples of prolonged ceasefires are the ones with the direst consequences in the four ‘de-escalation zones’ established as part of the Astana talks in 2017. They brought temporary, albeit partial, relief for areas that had hitherto endured permanent bombardments while the sieges lasted. These allowed the regime to concentrate its military resources on one area at a time. Once the offensive started, they would be subjected to more intense shelling than ever before and would in the end be forced to surrender.

CUSTODIANS NOT HAVING CONSISTENT STRATEGIES AND NO CREDIBLE THREAT OPTIONS

Among the factors that influence negotiations, credibility and consistency of the custodian is important, especially because parties to the war will ‘test will’⁶⁴ to maximize their gains from a potential deal. In August 2012, US President Barack Obama mentioned chemical weapons movement or use as a ‘red line’. Given that 2012 and 2013 were the two bloodiest years in Syria, and with most of this caused by conventional weapons, a warning against chemical warfare seemed inappropriate to address the overall suffering. However, the ‘red line’ did not deter the regime, which started using chemical weapons, including sarin gas, on a small scale, so as to test the resolve of the United States. More than 1,000 people died in the infamous incidents of August 2013, but there had been more than 30 documented cases prior to this.⁶⁵ The deal negotiated between the US and Russia in which the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile was agreed upon did not include any punitive measures for the regime. The latter’s compliance with what it had agreed to in order to avoid an intervention remains limited. In hundreds of cases, experts established the continued use of chemical weapons by the regime, with impunity.

⁶¹ For an understanding of ceasefires in Syria and their relevance as a political act, see Sosnowski, ‘The Troubles with Ceasefires’.

⁶² Adleh and Favier, “‘Local Reconciliation Agreements’ in Syria”, 7.

⁶³ Adleh and Favier, “‘Local Reconciliation Agreements’ in Syria”, 7; as an example, they mention the town of Madaya in which intra-regime tensions hindered the implementation.

⁶⁴ Stedman, ‘Spoiler Problems’, 15.

⁶⁵ Tobias Schneider and Theresa Lütkefend, ‘Nowhere to Hide: The Syrian Regime’s Approach to Chemical Warfare’, *Global Public Policy Institute*, April 2020.

Failure to carry through on threats – such as the ‘red line’ – is risky for peace processes. As Stedman notes: ‘If custodians fail to carry through on threats or fail to establish escalation dominance, the spoiler’s position may be strengthened.’⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

Existing literature on spoilers in peace processes does not cover the specific complex nature of the Syrian war in which Russia has been a member state of all international custodian combinations leading negotiations on Syria, a patron of the Syrian regime, and a (spoiling) party to negotiations. Nonetheless, many aspects of spoiler behaviour and constraints on custodians mentioned by scholars on spoiler behaviour are helpful to understand the dynamics at work in the Syrian case. The unique characteristic that the main spoiler’s strategies in the negotiations are not only tolerated but actively supported by Russia as a member state of the custodian(s) might limit the lessons to be learned for other conflicts. However, they raise questions about basic assumptions that are at the core of literature and research about negotiations.

This is most obvious with the assumption that parties will join a peace process in good faith. The regime joined the Geneva Process in 2012. Over the entire course of the war in Syria, the regime has not made any concessions that would support this belief – neither on the military nor the political or humanitarian levels. The above mentions many examples in which its devastating actions on the ground have delayed and burdened the peace process, with each instance diminishing the chances to find an inclusive political solution. This problem is exacerbated if a custodian’s member state, that is, the patron of a spoiler, might be ‘slow to acknowledge that their client is acting as a spoiler’.⁶⁷ In the case of the Syrian conflict – worse, even – the patron is acting as a spoiler itself. The insistence of Western governments that there is no military solution, understood also as the absence of an alternative to the Geneva Process, has had an impact on the negotiations as it put the bar for spoilers very low and from the beginning limited the willingness to make concessions; that even on crucial issues, and most prominently the use of chemical weapons, the pace has not changed emboldens violators of norms to continue to violate those norms. Thus, for the regime and its allies, the international talks came to serve as a smokescreen for the regime to portray itself as being interested in a negotiated settlement while advancing its military strategy. Through the latter, it was able to bind resources, and erode the opposition’s and the custodian’s credibility. It has deflected attention from the original purpose of a political transition by increasing humanitarian needs.

Having a spoiler among the warring parties is a challenge. Having, as in this case, a spoiler who is at the same time party, patron and part of the custodian minimizes chances for a settlement. It leaves the other member states of the custodian in a dilemma: they will be compromised by continuing in this toxic setting, but are unable to meaningfully threaten withdrawal since a determined spoiler ‘has everything to gain if custodians abandon the peace process’.⁶⁸ Russia’s successful establishment of alternative formats in which far-reaching decisions have been taken largely ignoring the United Nations contributed to this. This also compartmentalized the Geneva Process, hollowing it out to what Heydeman and Shaar call ‘zombie

⁶⁶ Stedman, ‘Spoiler Problems’, 15.

⁶⁷ Stedman, ‘Spoiler Problems’, 16.

⁶⁸ Stedman, ‘Spoiler Problems’, 15.

diplomacy' that deals with a sub-element of UN Resolution 2254 only, and even on that does not progress.⁶⁹ Working towards a way out of this dilemma would require considering the nature of not only the goals of the regime but also those of its patron, Russia, including those on a global level, outside of the Syrian context.

Peace talks are commonly perceived as a constructive means for conflict resolution. While it is true that conflict resolution cannot be thought of without peace talks, the peculiarities of the Syrian case raise questions about whether this has been turned upside down by the regime and Russia. The UN-led Geneva efforts to solve the conflict today look more like a simulation of a peace process that in fact has been turned into a means to achieve a military solution.

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⁶⁹ Steven Heydeman and Karam Shaar, 'Zombie Diplomacy and the Fate of Syria's Constitutional Committee', *Brookings*, 24 January 2022.

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22. Globalized finance capital, hegemony and the Middle East: through the lens of radical political economy

Raymond Hinnebusch

INTRODUCTION

Overview

This chapter traces the role of MENA in the evolution of the global political economy, as the latter has been decisively shaped by the relative power of global finance capital and, in parallel, that of the hegemon of the day (the UK, then the US). It first examines the stages in the parallel development of finance capital and the various forms of imperialism as they impacted MENA. MENA was initially constituted by its incorporation as a periphery of the world capitalist system in the first wave of ‘financial globalization’ under nineteenth-century imperialism. After an interregnum in which finance capital was temporarily rolled back, including its dominance over the Middle East, a restoration of neo-liberal financial globalization beginning in the 1980s was driven by an alliance between the US hegemon, global finance capital and MENA’s oil monarchies; importantly, it was the struggle over Middle East oil profits that drove the neo-liberalization of the whole global political economy. The chapter examines the drivers, developmental consequences and geopolitical outcomes of contemporary globalization in MENA. While a few in MENA benefited from this, the region as a whole has been damaged by the massive capital export, crony capitalism, social inequality and US intervention it precipitated, as will be demonstrated.

Approach

The only tradition that provides adequate tools to analyse the reality of financial globalization is Marxist-inspired radical political economy, which exposes the unequal power relations underlying the global political economy and puts it in proper historical context. Thus, capitalist enterprises, Harvey¹ observes, have a strong expansionary tendency but financial globalization is, in parallel, also propelled and managed by a hegemonic state; for Arrighi and Silver,² this results when a hegemonic capitalist state faces rising competition reducing the rate of profit while capital accumulation exceeds domestic investment possibilities. To avoid decline, the hegemon exports its finance capital, lending and buying up assets globally to

¹ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

² Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly Silver, ‘Capitalism and World (Dis)order’, in *Empires, Systems and States: Great Transformations in International Politics*, eds Michael Cox, Tim Dunne and Ken Booth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 257–79.

re-inflate profits. The first capitalist hegemon, the UK, and the current one, the US, have been the main exporters of finance capital. The UK originally shaped the core–periphery division of the world while the current globalization – in reality, the Americanization – of finance is fundamental to reproducing American empire.³ Neo-liberalism is the ideological expression of the dominance of finance capital.⁴ Crucially, current-day finance capital is seen (for example by Gowan, Gill, Seabrooke and Michael Cox),⁵ as essentially *rentier*, at best seeking monopoly profits abroad, but also increasingly detached from the real economy, with a minority of financial flows related to production and much of it predatory or parasitic, for example used for acquisitions, asset stripping, tax evasion and money laundering, or exploiting the savings of ordinary people for currency and other forms of speculation that yield paper super-profits (protected by taxpayers from super-losses).

The analysis in this chapter proceeds by systematically linking two extensive bodies of literature: that of critical political economy at the global level, and that on neo-liberalism and globalization and imperialism in MENA.

THE STAGES OF IMPERIALISM: THE EXPANSION, CONTRACTION AND RE-EXPANSION OF GLOBALIZED FINANCE CAPITAL

The Middle East in the Construction of the Core–Periphery Global Political Economy

World Systems Theory sees the origins of the modern global political economy in the ‘long sixteenth century’, initiating Western imperialism’s worldwide search for commercial monopolies and exploitation of pre-capitalist forms of labour, in which the wresting of the East–West trade routes from Middle East Islamic empires was a decisive moment. Later, early capitalist industrialization in Britain depended on capital accumulation from exploitation of the non-Western world, driving both economic globalization and territorial empire, as detailed in analyses by Rosenberg, Colas, Callinicos and Halliday.⁶ The nineteenth-century age of Britain’s hegemony corresponded to its export of manufactures to the world under an ‘impe-

³ Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, ‘Global Capitalism and American Empire’, *Socialist Register* 40 (2004).

⁴ Gerard Dumenil and Dominique Levy, ‘Cost and Benefits of Neo-Liberalism: A Class Analysis’, *Review of International Political Economy* 8:4 (2010).

⁵ Peter Gowan, *The Global Gamble: Washington’s Faustian Bid for World Dominance* (London and New York: Verso 1999); Stephan Gill, *Power and Resistance in the New World Order* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 124; Leonard Seabrooke, ‘The Economic Taproot of US Imperialism’, *International Politics*, 41 (2004): 293–318; Michael Cox, ‘Relevance after the Cold War’, in *Historical Materialism and Globalization*, eds Mark Rupert and Hazel Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 59–74.

⁶ Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society: A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations* (London: Verso, 1994), 91–122, 159–73; Alejandro Colas, *Empire* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 22–6, 71–115; Alex Callinicos, *Imperialism and Global Political Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 25–66; Fred Halliday, ‘The Pertinence of Imperialism’, in *Historical Materialism and Globalization*, ed. Rupert Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 75–89.

rialism of free trade',⁷ but as its industrial dominance was challenged by new industrializers, Britain became more dependent on the export of capital. Late nineteenth-century monopoly capitalism drove a great expansion in European foreign investment and imperialist competition to divide up the remaining non-capitalist world.⁸ For Hobson and Lenin, the economic taproot of imperialism was under-consumption at home, a product of driving down wages to avert the fall in the rate of profit, combined with over-saving by capitalists of monopoly profits and rents, engorging a new finance capital. Monopoly capitalists were therefore driven to find markets and outlets for investment abroad and, for Luxembourg, to extract surplus value from the pre-capitalist periphery.⁹

Halliday underlined the role of imperialism in opening the Middle East to European capital. Britain's imperialism of free trade involved coercive treaties forcing open Ottoman, Persian and Egyptian markets to its products and capital. Ironically, the efforts of these states at defensive modernization to ward off imperialism relied on Western loans and when debt and default followed, creditors used imperial power to take over their public finances, enabling the exploitation of indigenous taxpayers to repay European bond-holders; when this provoked revolt in Egypt, Britain occupied the country and stayed indefinitely. Britain was also drawn into the region by the need to prevent its rivals' encroachment on the declining Ottoman Empire, which could threaten its domination of India. The rivalries of finance capitals were, for Lenin, a factor driving the First World War, which led to Ottoman collapse and the parceling out of the Middle East among the victors.

The result was a growing incorporation of the Middle East into the world economic division of labour as an exporter of primary products processed by Western industries. This was paralleled by the creation of 'feudal' landed classes, a certain de-industrialization and the retarding of an indigenous bourgeoisie, as detailed in an extensive literature by scholars of the region such as Halliday, Owen, Issawi, Adelson and Sayf.¹⁰

During the First World War, the discovery of oil in Iran and the simultaneous transition of the British fleet from coal to oil made MENA an immediate magnet for post-War British ambitions. The territorial fragmentation of the formerly large regional market by Britain and France, completed after Ottoman collapse, was accompanied in Arabia by the carving out of mini-states along the Gulf designed to concentrate much of the newly discovered 'black gold' within small dependent client states and prevent an indigenous 'oil hegemon'.¹¹ As a result of

⁷ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, Second series, 6:1 (1953).

⁸ Callinicos, *Imperialism*, 152–3.

⁹ Colas, *Empire*, 102–14; Anthony Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1990), 1–24, 42–56, 58–72, 161–224.

¹⁰ Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Charles Issawi, *An Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Roger Adelson, *London and the Invention of the Middle East: Money, Power and War, 1902–1922* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (London and New York, Methuen, 1981); Ahmad Sayf, 'Free Trade, Competition and Industrial Decline: The Case of Iran in the Nineteenth Century', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40:3 (2004): 55–74.

¹¹ Giacomo Luciani, 'Oil and Political Economy in the International Relations of the Middle East', in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 5th ed., 2019), 107–31.

this fragmentation, the Middle East is, as Buzan¹² puts it, the only great civilization that has not been able to reconstitute itself as a major power, as China and India, not subjected to similar fragmentation, have done; this reality, juxtaposed to memories of greatness under Islamic empires, is a main reason for the concentration of resistance to the West in the MENA region. In this phase, the role of MENA in the global political economy was largely that of a victim, reduced to a peripheralized region in the world capitalist division of labour.

Decolonization, Cold War and the Retreat of Finance Capital (1945–80)

Classic imperialism and the globalization of finance capital produced a reaction, culminating after the Second World War, that rolled back the global dominance of financial capital and that of the core over the periphery. In the Western capitalist economies, the social damage inflicted by unregulated finance capital, manifest in the Great Depression, as well as a need to contain the spread of socialism led to efforts to make finance the ‘servant rather than the master of production’.¹³ The resulting Fordist Keynesianism generated a long economic boom. In the core, a power balance between the state; national capital, which had a stake in the prosperity of the home market; and organized labour allowed the sharing of the benefits of mass production and a welfare state.¹⁴ Under ‘embedded liberalism’,¹⁵ tariffs were gradually reduced to stimulate international trade, but core states retained control over the flow of capital across borders and fixed exchange rates gave little scope for currency speculation. At the same time, revolution and world war had produced a bipolar world in which the US, a new capitalist hegemon, rose, providing the key public goods of a ‘sound’ global currency, the gold-backed dollar needed by other capitalist trading states and the containment of socialism’s threat to the propertied classes.¹⁶ Crucially, however, a socialist counter-hegemon, the USSR, kept key parts of the global economy out of capitalist hands, constrained the Western projection of military imperialism and limited US hegemony to ‘half’ of the core.

This was therefore an optimal period for development in the ‘Third World’ periphery. The spread of the sovereign-states system to the ex-colonies, combined with bipolarity, produced, as Clark¹⁷ argues, a real diffusion of global power. This was reflected in the Middle East. De-colonialization, Cold War Soviet constraints on Western intervention and alternative East Bloc sources of technology, capital and markets enabled the promotion of more autonomous state-centric national economies. The rise of populist authoritarian republics (1955–67)

¹² Barry Buzan, ‘New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty-First Century’, *International Affairs*, 67:3 (1991): 246–7.

¹³ Martin Konings, ‘The Construction of US Financial Power’, *Review of International Studies* 35 (2009): 69–94.

¹⁴ Stephen Gill, *Power and Resistance in The New World Order* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): 41–65, 159–89; William Robinson, ‘Capitalist Globalization and the Transnationalization of the State’, in *Historical Materialism and Globalization*, eds Mark Rupert and Hazel Smith (London and New York: Routledge 2002).

¹⁵ Gerard Ruggie, ‘International Regimes, Transactions and Change: Embedded Liberalism’, *International Organization*, 36:2 (1982): 379–415.

¹⁶ Harvey, *New Imperialism*, 26–86.

¹⁷ Ian Clark, ‘Another Double Movement: The Great Transformation after the Cold War’, in *Empires, Systems and States*, eds Michael Cox, Tim Dunne and Ken Booth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 237–55.

reflected, in the discourse of Marxists,¹⁸ a stage at which the landed oligarchy was weakening but an industrial capitalist class able to displace it had not emerged, leaving a leadership gap filled by military officers and intellectuals of petit bourgeois origin. Consolidating power through populist alliances with parts of the working and peasant classes, and through 'overdevelopment' of the bureaucratic and military arms of the state, these 'Bonapartist' regimes carried out 'passive' (after Gramsci, see Cox¹⁹) 'revolutions from above',²⁰ driving the transition from 'feudalism' to capitalism while balancing both between domestic class forces and between the superpowers during the Cold War. Reacting against the first wave of globalization, they attempted to reverse economic peripheralization through land reforms destroying the imperialist-fostered landed oligarchy and through state-led import substitute industrialization (ISI) marginalizing the weak or Western-dependent private sector. Initially, the result combined growth with low inequality, by global standards, and significant poverty reduction compared to states that did not have populist revolutions.²¹ However, this success was not sustained, and that, in turn, would be a factor in the re-opening of the MENA region to a resurgence of global finance capital.

The Middle East Roots of the Neo-Liberalized Global Political Economy

The re-globalization of Anglo-American finance capital and the accompanying neo-liberal revolution that began in the late 1970s was the product of a drive by the US hegemon to make up for the loss of its productive ascendancy in the face of rising competition from Europe and Asia through the export of finance capital.²² No automatic product of the market, it was a *deliberate construction of agents*, of what Harvey²³ (2005) calls a 'Wall Street-US Treasury-IMF complex', seeking to restore the global supremacy of finance capital over productive capital²⁴ and of the core over the periphery²⁵ that had been diluted in the period of bipolarity and embedded liberalism.

The OPEC-engineered oil price boom of the 1970s played a crucial role in the reinvigoration of US hegemony and the parallel unleashing of the finance capital's globalization, as detailed particularly by Alnasrawi, Spiro and Terzian.²⁶ The 1960 formation of the Organization of Oil Export Countries (OPEC), combined with rising oil demand in the early 1970s and the Arab oil producers' boycott of the US over its arms deliveries to Israel in the 1973 Arab-Israeli

¹⁸ Samir Amin, *The Arab Nation: Nationalism and Class Struggles* (London, Zed Press 1978); Nazih Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1995).

¹⁹ Robert W. Cox, 'Social Forces, State and World Orders', in *Approaches to World Order*, ed. Robert W. Cox, with Timothy Sinclair (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 85–123.

²⁰ Ellen Kay Trimberger, *Revolution from Above: Military Bureaucrats and Development in Japan, Turkey, Egypt and Peru* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1978).

²¹ Richard Adams and J. Page, 'Poverty, Inequality and Growth in Selected Middle East and North Africa Countries: 1980–2000', *World Development* 31:12 (2003): 2027–48.

²² Arrighi and Silver, 'Capitalism and World (Dis)order.'

²³ Harvey, *New Imperialism*.

²⁴ Gill, *Power and Resistance*, 41–65.

²⁵ Clark, 'Double Movement', 237–55.

²⁶ Abbas Alnasrawi, *Arab Nationalism, Oil and the Political Economy of Dependency* (New York and London: Greenwood Press, 1991); David E. Spiro, *The Hidden Hand of American Hegemony: Petrodollar Recycling and International Markets* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 93–8; Pierre Terzian, *OPEC: The Inside Story* (London: Zed 1985).

war – which led to an oil price explosion and the nationalization of the oil industry throughout the region – seemed to mark a decline in control of oil by Western powers, including the US.²⁷ Yet, the US was able to use the oil crisis to reassert its hegemony in new ways: it accommodated itself to the 1970s oil price rises, if not actually encouraging them, in order to hurt its more oil-import dependent European and Japanese competitors, blunting their challenge to US industrial superiority.²⁸

Spero demonstrated how the US used the energy crisis to propel financial globalization. Washington rejected European proposals to recycle the vast petrodollars being earned by the oil-producing states through the IMF and pressured its Saudi and Iranian clients to keep selling oil exclusively in dollars (despite its rapid fall in value) and to invest their earnings in US treasury bills, banks, property and massive arms purchases; as a result, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the smaller Gulf emirates became conduits for a massive transfer of petrodollars from around the world to the US Treasury and Wall Street.²⁹ This, combined with US insistence on the deregulation of global capital markets, was a watershed in unleashing the finance capitalism that drove globalization. As part of this deal, Saudi Arabia also undertook, as the ‘swing producer’ in OPEC, to moderate oil prices to the benefit of the West in return for US military protection; the resultant growing US military role in the Gulf was pivotal to promoting the idea of the indispensability of US hegemony for world energy security.

In parallel, in unilaterally ending the convertibility of the dollar to gold, the US destroyed the Bretton-Woods monetary system and set out to construct an alternative dollar-centred monetary regime with unstable floating exchange rates. The post-Bretton-Woods monetary order immensely benefited US hegemony. It gave the US *seigneurage* privileges since the dollar remained the main global currency but, being unlinked to gold, the US could print at will and thereby manipulate the value of the dollar, allowing it to evade the balance of payments constraints other states faced and, amounting, in Hudson’s view,³⁰ to a virtual tax on other states. This was facilitated by the fact that paying for dollar-denominated oil imports required other states to earn dollars by exporting to the US; exchange rate instability also forced other states to build up dollar reserves to protect their own currencies against the currency speculation that, allowing enormous unearned rent for financial operators, became rampant with the floating of exchange rates. As a result, productive capital, mostly Asian, began piling up dollar surpluses in US banks and government bonds; these were also partly political investments to protect access to the huge US market.³¹ These mechanisms funded rampant US consumerism, militarization and imperial overreach and allowed US corporations to buy up assets globally. The US economy became dependent on these huge inflows of finance from around the world, giving Washington an interest in the persistence of monetary instability.³² This also enhanced the ability of the US to use access not only to its market but to the dollar-denominated world

²⁷ Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), 139–41, 190–4.

²⁸ According to the US ambassador in Saudi Arabia this was done deliberately to attack the economies of US rivals (see Terzian, *OPEC*, 189–90).

²⁹ According to British government documents, the US threatened military action if they did not recycle petrodollars (see Harvey, 219).

³⁰ Michael Hudson, *Super Imperialism: The Origins and Fundamentals of US World Dominance* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

³¹ Seabrooke, ‘Economic Taproot’.

³² Gowan, *Global Gamble*; Hudson, *Super Imperialism*.

financial payments system as a political weapon against other states, notably to enforce extra-territorial secondary sanctions.

At the same time, US policy encouraged the lending of the OPEC surplus by US banks to oil importers in the 1970s and 1980s. Owing to the high interest rates engineered by Reagan and Thatcher, Third World oil importers fell into debt, which was then used as a pretext by the US and IMF to impose measures ostensibly meant to facilitate debt payment: structural adjustment, requiring domestic deflation and currency devaluation which forced the populations of debtor states to bear the costs of reckless lending by US banks and which engineered a massive wealth transfer from the global South to the North. But the US–IMF *combinazione* went further in seeking to reshape LDC economies into a single neo-liberal mould: the forced opening of their markets to foreign competition undercut national capitalism, led to considerable de-industrialization and, together with the privatization of state-owned utilities and the parallel opening of LDCs to foreign finance capital, facilitated takeovers of indigenous firms by core-based foreign investors. A switch by LDCs to export strategies needed to repay debt required driving down wages and taxes to make products competitive on global markets, thus providing cheap goods for Western consumers at the expense of Third World workers. The opening of LDC markets to Western multinationals allowed them to reap monopoly profits, and made the former vulnerable to speculative flows of finance capital while requiring them to shape their policies to maintain their creditworthiness in financial markets. Wall Street currency speculators also made huge unearned fortunes out of speculation on monetary instability and created vulture funds and hedge funds which attacked currencies, creating economic crises and credit crunches. Since in time of crisis capital fled to Wall Street, states in trouble had to borrow from US institutions, opening the door to IMF-imposed restructuring, forced bankruptcies and fire-sales of valuable assets which were acquired by some of the same speculators that started the crisis: a ‘primitive capital accumulation by dispossession’, in Harvey’s words.³³

Globalization of Anglo-American finance capital led to restorations of the great social and global inequalities that had been eased in the Cold War period. The oil price boom of the seventies led to stagflation, preparing the way for the neo-liberal assault on the Keynesian welfare state in the Western core. As the market became global, corporations in the core lost the stake they had under Fordism in the prosperity of their workers and exited in search of cheap labour in the periphery: while much manufacturing production was exported to the periphery, profits were exported back to the core.³⁴ The division of the world into states competing for investment allowed finance capital to precipitate a ‘race to the bottom’ in terms of social standards and labour rights. Periodic economic crises were used to discipline labour and compress wages while financiers were rescued by taxpayers from their casino capitalist losses, even as their massive tax evasion via offshore havens enervated the fiscal base of the welfare state.³⁵ Under what Gill³⁶ called ‘disciplinary constitutionalism’, disadvantageous trade and

³³ Harvey, *New Imperialism*, 137–82. See also Gill, *Power and Resistance*, 143–52 and Gowan, *Global Gamble*, 95–100 for evidence on the arguments of the preceding paragraph.

³⁴ Gill, *Power and Resistance*, 93–115; M. Scott Solomon, ‘Ideology and the Politics of Globalizing Capitalism’, in *Historical Materialism and Globalization*, ed. Rupert Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 284–98; Susan Strange, *Casino Capitalism* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986); William Robinson, ‘Capitalist Globalization’.

³⁵ Christopher Rude, ‘The Role of Financial Discipline in Imperial Strategy’, in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, *The Empire Reloaded* (Dublin: Merlin Press, 2004): 82–107.

³⁶ Gill, *Power and Resistance*, 159–80.

investment agreements were forced on the LDCs that prioritized property and investor rights; thus periphery states became 'transmission belts', as Cox³⁷ put it, for the enforcement of capitalist discipline on their peoples. The result was an unprecedented increase in social inequality within states and globally. The richest 1 per cent of the global population acquired income equivalent to that of the poorest 57 per cent, while the rich-to-poor income gap grew from 2:1 in 1800 to 64:1 by 1990.³⁸ A new trans-national bourgeoisie, dominated by a global plutocracy, emerged, led by the US hegemon, which promoted neo-liberalism via the IMF and WTO.³⁹ Democracy was hollowed out as the economic policies of all political parties converged on the neo-liberal consensus. The function of states was thus reconfigured away from the provision of social needs to citizens towards competition for finance capital and the policing of popular resistance unleashed by this new order.⁴⁰

CONTEMPORARY GLOBALIZATION AND THE MIDDLE EAST

The Drivers and Developmental Consequences of Finance Capitalism in MENA

MENA was vulnerable to the restoration of financial globalization due to a number of converging factors.

The failure of state-led developmental experiments in MENA's populist republics prepared the way. The subordination of development strategies to states' political and security needs had resulted in inefficient public sectors, high military expenditures and populist distribution policies that enervated state capital accumulation, while private capital exited; the resulting low domestic savings made investment dependent on borrowing or aid, presaging a restoration of dependency.

In parallel, the oil-producing monarchies recycled petrodollars that might otherwise have been invested in regional development: MENA suffered the world's highest capital flight as a percentage of GNP (100 per cent), with \$150–200 billion in foreign banks or financial markets in the 1990s (inflating the power of global finance capital); 40 per cent of oil revenues was spent on Western arms deals and another 40 per cent invested in the West even as capital-poor MENA countries went into debt to Western lenders.⁴¹

By the 1980s, the populist republics, whose overdeveloped state apparatuses exceeded their economics bases' capacity to sustain, moved, under the so-called *infatih*, to open their

³⁷ Cox, 'Social Forces'.

³⁸ Diane Perrons, *Globalization and Social Change: People and Places in a Divided World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004): 35; Stephen Hartnett and Laura Stengrim, *Globalization and Empire: The US Invasion of Iraq, Free Markets and the Twilight of Democracy* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 2006): 163.

³⁹ Cox, 'Social Forces'; William Robinson, 'Capitalist Globalization'; Kees Van der Pijl, *Transnational Classes and International Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁴⁰ Francis Shor, *Dying Empire: US Imperialism and Global Resistance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010): 27–41.

⁴¹ Paulo Guerrieri, 'Globalism and Regionalism in the World Economy and the Middle East', in *The Middle East in Global Change*, ed. Laura Guazzone (London: Macmillan Press 1997): 153–73; Piercarlo Padoan, 'The Political Economy of Regional Integration in the Middle East,' in *The Middle East in Global Change*, ed. Laura Guazzone (London: Macmillan Press 1997): 174–200; Alnasrawi, *Arab Nationalism*, 102–4, 114.

economies to private and foreign capital. International actors were the drivers of economic liberalization but they had, nevertheless, to impose it through MENA states, and this, in turn, was a function of changes in states' social bases. The populist authoritarian republics that had initially attacked the oligarchy and fostered plebeian constituencies over time generated a new dominant class alliance. The ruling 'state bourgeoisie', enriched in public office, came, as etatist development exhausted itself, to see economic liberalization as providing opportunities for it to invest its accumulated wealth and thereby transform itself into a property-owning class; it was allied with a revived private bourgeoisie of contractors and middlemen doing business with the state that saw new opportunities in *infatih* to gain foreign partners and to acquire public sector assets. Both sought to capture a share of the new oil capital concentrated after 1973 in the Gulf.⁴²

Economic *infatih*, initially engineered to bring in resources to cover short-term fiscal deficits, resulted in import booms financed by high-interest loans, which, following the oil price bust of 1986, resulted in debt and stagnant growth. This made states vulnerable to pressures from the Paris Club of lenders and to IMF-imposed structural adjustments, including tariff reductions, public spending cuts and the reversal of land reform legislation.⁴³ The import boom also both facilitated enrichment of merchants granted import monopolies while often bankrupting local industries. This enhanced vulnerability to IMF demands for privatization of the public sector, in which public monopolies were appropriated as the private monopolies of 'networks of privilege'⁴⁴ – a new crony business class increasingly incorporated into ruling 'infatih' coalitions.⁴⁵

Neo-liberalization led to the development of underdevelopment. There was considerable retreat from previous levels of industrialization achieved in the period of ISI since private investment did not substitute for the decline in public investment, and the region remained low in manufacturing exports, with localized exceptions relying on tax breaks and low wages to attract foreign investment in light industries.⁴⁶ Crony capitalism provided little new skilled employment because investors concentrated in tertiary sectors where capital remained mobile and readily exportable – tourism, commerce and services, rather than industry – while politically unconnected investors were deterred and small firms lacked access to capital.⁴⁷ The region thus remained largely stuck in the periphery as an exporter of primary products – such as

⁴² Isam al-Khafaji, *Tormented Births: Passages to Modernity in Europe and the Middle East*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004).

⁴³ Alnasrawi, *Arab Nationalism*, 153–68, 178–84; Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Globalization and Geopolitics of the Middle East* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), ch. 2; Karen Pfeifer and Marsha Pripstein Posusney, 'Arab Economies and Globalization: An Overview', in *Women and Globalization in the Middle East*, eds Eleanor Doumato and Marsha Pripstein Posusney (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2003), 25–54; Tim Niblock and Emma Murphy, *Economic and Political Liberalization in the Middle East* (London: British Academic Press 1993).

⁴⁴ Steven Heydemann, *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: The Politics of Economic Reform Revisited* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

⁴⁵ John Waterbury, 'Twilight of the State Bourgeoisie?' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (1991): 1–17; Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Emma Murphy, 'Transformation of the Corporatist State in the Middle East', *Third World Quarterly* 17:4 (1996): 753–72.

⁴⁶ Mahmoud Abdel-Fadil, 'Macroeconomic Tendencies and Policy Options in the Arab Region', *The Middle East in Global Change*, ed. Laura Guazzzone (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 120–34.

⁴⁷ Toby Dodge and Richard Higgott, eds, *Globalization and the Middle East: Islam, Economy, Society and Politics* (London: RIIA, 2002); Laura Guazzzone and Daniela Pioppi, *The Arab State and*

cotton and oil – with growth rates correlating to the boom and bust of international commodity markets. On the other hand, the social achievements of the populist period were whittled away. According to Adams and Page,⁴⁸ relative to other regions, MENA used to be relatively low in income inequality and poverty levels, thanks, in large measure, to populist policies involving substantial investments in the 1960–80 period in education and health that gave momentum to big increases in life expectancy and quality of life indicators, while inequality fell from the 1960s to the early 1980s. However, reviving capitalism meant investors had to be favoured over labour. Neo-liberal policies such as the rollback in labour rights, ending job security and wage growth without according the right to strike, and the rollback of land reform, notably in Egypt, drove down the share of labour in GDP to the advantage of capital. Income inequality rose, especially earnings at the top. At the same time, IMF-driven structural adjustments that targeted cutting subsidies on popular consumption commodities such as bread (while leaving intact military purchases from Western arms dealers) led to a contraction in populist welfare, producing ‘food riots’ across the region. A period of rising welfare, upward mobility and rapid population growth (1960s–70s) followed by one of falling living standards, massive youth unemployment and frustrated expectations (from the 1990s on) created a potentially explosive situation.

In this context, authoritarian power was necessarily preserved but, no longer in the service of ‘revolution from above’, was now used to reconstruct and protect the new inequalities unleashed by infitah from rising popular social discontent. Under this new ‘post-populist’ authoritarianism, regimes restructured – and narrowed – their social bases. On the one hand, privatization provided regime elites with new patronage resources to foster and co-opt a supportive crony capitalist class.⁴⁹ On the other hand, rollbacks of the populist social contract on which regimes had initially built their legitimacy, and abdication of their developmental and welfare roles to the private sector and religious charity networks, made them vulnerable to the rise of Islamic opposition, which, though funded by private business, powerfully attracted the marginalized strata victimized by neo-liberal policies.

Regimes’ increased reliance on trusted in-groups and privileged classes stunted the development of equitable political institutions.⁵⁰ Rather, in a process of ‘lopsided political liberalization’,⁵¹ the interest groups of the bourgeoisie were given greater corporatist and parliamentary access to power and more rule of law; elections were manipulated to empower bourgeois parties supportive of neo-liberalism and marginalize populist ones, and corporatist arrangements, which in the populist era had allowed mass organizations access to decision-makers, now become instruments for disciplining and demobilizing mass strata.⁵² It was against this

Neo-liberal Globalization: The Restructuring of the State in the Middle East (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2009).

⁴⁸ Richard Adams and J. Page, ‘Poverty, Inequality and Growth in Selected Middle East and North Africa Countries: 1980–2000’, *World Development* 31:12 (2003): 2027–48.

⁴⁹ Stephan King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

⁵⁰ Eberhard Kienle, *A Grand Delusion: Democracy and Economic Reform in Egypt* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2001).

⁵¹ Raymond Hinnebusch, ‘Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique’, *Democratization*, 13:3 (2006): 373–95.

⁵² Bradley Louis Glasser (2001), *Economic Development and Political Reform: The Impact of External Capital on the Middle East* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2001); King, *New*

'post-populist authoritarianism' that the Arab intifada of 2011 mobilized – but even where it overthrew authoritarian presidents, the global dominance of neo-liberalism posed an intractable obstacle to democratic consolidation in MENA, and rather encouraged authoritarian restoration.

The Geopolitical Outcomes of Financial Globalization: Informal Empire and Military Intervention

The globalization of finance capital signalled the emergence of a new kind of informal global 'empire' based on the structural market power of the US-centred transnational ruling class rather than on physical control of territory, since wealth no longer derived as immediately from the latter as was hitherto the case.⁵³ In the periphery, including MENA, contemporary empire is indirect: rather than territorial control, it means imposing free trade on weaker states, penetrating their domestic politics, co-opting their elites and spreading neo-liberalism as a hegemonic ideology to which there is no perceived alternative;⁵⁴ moreover, as Wallerstein⁵⁵ points out, the fragmentation of the global states system prevents the combination of the have-nots against the imperial core. However structural (market, ideological) power is not enough and coercion is also needed, as Petras and Veltmeyer⁵⁶ insist: indeed, *global finance capital and global military intervention are inextricably linked* because globalization inevitably generates resistance from its victims, provoking intervention.⁵⁷ It is no accident that the two states at the forefront of worldwide interventionism, and which maintain militaries with global reach (aircraft carriers, counter-insurgency forces) – the US and the UK – also host the main centres of finance capital and are historically the two largest global investors. As Gowan⁵⁸ put it, militarized empire is the superstructure of globalization.

The Middle East stood out as the epicentre of US militarism and target of US intervention: as the location of the oil and the generator of petrodollars that sustain US hegemony, and increasingly also of the main resistance to this hegemony. Two US-led wars on Iraq – the first coinciding with the collapse of bipolarity and the socialist alternative, the second the apotheosis of unipolarity – were meant to consolidate control over oil hegemony and defeat regional resistance to it. Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait was in part meant to put regional oil in the service of a political challenge to the West. Were Iraq to have retained Kuwaiti oil fields and remained in a position to intimidate Saudi Arabia, it could nullify Saudi Arabia's role as

Authoritarianism; Martha Pripstein Posusney, *Labor and the State in Egypt: Workers, Unions and Economic Restructuring* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁵³ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization or Empire?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Colas, *Empire*, 162–71).

⁵⁴ Ronald Robinson, 'Imperial Theory and the Question of Imperialism after Empire', in *Perspectives on Imperialism and Decolonization*, eds Robert F. Holland and Gowher Rizvi (London: Frank Cass 1984).

⁵⁵ Immanuel Wallerstein, 'The Rise and Future Demise of the Capitalist World System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16 (1974): 385–415.

⁵⁶ James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, *Empire with Imperialism: The Globalizing Dynamics of Neo-liberal Capitalism* (London: Zed, 2005).

⁵⁷ Paul MacDonald, 'Those Who Forget Historiography Are Doomed to Republish It: Empire, Imperialism and Contemporary Debates about American Power', *Review of International Studies* 35 (2009): 45–67.

⁵⁸ Peter Gowan, 'Empire as Superstructure', *Security Dialogue* 35 (2004).

pro-Western swing producer of oil and give Saddam Hussein hegemony over 40 per cent of world oil reserves – at a time when American reserves had shrunk from 34 per cent to 7 per cent of the global total. Unlike Saudi Arabia, which by virtue of its security dependence on the US and investments in the Western economy could be depended upon to moderate prices and recycle the proceeds through Western banks and the purchase of Western arms, Iraq was not similarly dependent and, on the contrary, was threatening to make its oil policy conditional on favourable Western policy in the Arab–Israeli conflict.⁵⁹ Gowan⁶⁰ argued that Iraq could have become an alternative to the Wall Street–City of London financial system as it began to grant oil concessions to US rivals and initiated a shift away from the sale of Middle East oil in dollars to euros. Indeed, Saddam threatened to assume the leadership of a revived Arab nationalism and challenge Western interests across the region.

While this threat had to be countered, the Iraqi invasion was also an *opportunity* for the US to establish direct hegemony over the region and its oil that, from the time of OPEC and the nationalization of Western oil companies, had had to be exercised indirectly, through client states. Because the invasion coincided with the USSR's withdrawal from global competition with the US, the risk of a superpower confrontation that would hitherto have restrained US intervention was removed. War presented a chance to destroy Iraq, a prime example of what the Pentagon had identified as the main remaining post-Cold War opposition to US hegemony: Third World nationalist regimes. Finally, war was an opportunity to demonstrate the dependence of America's economic competitors on its hegemonic role in securing oil supplies and to ensure that Gulf petrodollars would continue to be primarily recycled through US institutions and serve US competitiveness.⁶¹

The 2003 war on Iraq was another pivotal moment in globalization. Control of Middle East oil was becoming ever more crucial to America's hegemony, as its own reserves declined, while 9/11 had produced a perceived need to deliver a 'shock and awe' blow to regional resistance to this hegemony. At the same time as the reliability of Saudi Arabia as a US surrogate to control the region's oil was coming into doubt (as a result of its restrictions on use of its bases to strike Iraq, and tensions over US support for Israel and involvement of Saudi citizens in 9/11), Iraq, possessing the next largest oil reserves, was recognized as a potential alternative swing producer – albeit not as long as Iraqi oil was kept off the market by the sanctions used to contain the Saddam regime. Saddam was seeking to escape containment by handing out concessions to French, Russian and Chinese companies while excluding British and American ones. The 2003 Iraq war was a way of smashing this resistance to US hegemony while at the same time consolidating America's grip over the Middle East oil supplies needed by its economic competitors and providing a hedge against a hegemonic power shift to China: as in the 1970s, therefore, MENA was used by the US to secure its hegemony against emergent

⁵⁹ Raymond Hinnebusch, 'The Middle East in the World Hierarchy: Imperialism and Resistance', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 14:2 (2010): 213–46.

⁶⁰ Gowan, *Global Gamble*.

⁶¹ Paul Aarts, 'The New Oil Order: Built on Sand?' *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16:2 (1994); Atif Kubursi and Salim Mansur, 'Oil & the Gulf War: An American Century or a "New World Order"?' *Arab Studies Quarterly* 15:4 (1993): 1–18; Raymond Hinnebusch, 'The US Invasion of Iraq: Explanations and Implications', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 16:3 (2007): 209–28; Michael T. Klare, 'The Pentagon's New Paradigm', in *The Gulf War Reader*, eds Micah Sifry and Christopher Cerf (New York: Times Books, 1996), 466–79.

potential rivals.⁶² The seizure of Iraqi oil was an attempt at Harvey's⁶³ 'accumulation by dispossession' on a grand scale.⁶⁴

Yet America's increasingly overt presence in the Middle East only intensified resistance, albeit mostly at the sub/trans-state level. The region hosts the only post-Cold war counter-hegemonic ideology, Islam.⁶⁵ However, it is US policy – particularly its support for Israeli colonization of the Palestinian territories, but also since 9/11 its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq – which has given a violent turn to this resistance, in the form of international 'terrorism'. The US then made its 'war on terrorism' an element in global acceptance of its hegemony. To be sure, the rising costs of America's 'imperial overreach' led to increased caution in the pursuit of large-scale military interventions such as Iraq and Afghanistan, as could be seen, for example, in US reluctance regarding intervention in Syria after 2010. While this opened the door to the military intervention of rivals such as Russia and Iran in Syria, Washington still deployed more cost-effective means of preventing their victory, notably the backing of proxies in the conflict and, more recently, abuse of its domination over the global financial system to deploy sanctions that effectively prevented the economic reconstruction of the country. Thus, even as its political, military and economic hegemony seemed increasingly challenged amid the emergence of a multipolar world, the anomaly of its dominance over the operations of the world banking system allowed the US to continue to play a hegemonic role, specifically in MENA.⁶⁶ Trump's maximum-pressure campaign against Iran was another case of Washington's increasing overuse of secondary sanctions of dubious international legality, often over MENA but ultimately targeting its global rivals, Russia and China. These practices could yet end up hastening the construction of alternative financial systems that would neutralize this last remaining foundation of US unipolarity. As such, MENA has again become a testing ground of the balance of global power.

CONCLUSION

The first wave of Western imperial expansion debilitated the region as a potential player in the world system. After a brief interregnum in which the contraction of finance capital allowed

⁶² Hinnebusch, 'US Invasion of Iraq'; Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris 2004).

⁶³ Harvey, *New Imperialism*, 1–25, 62–86.

⁶⁴ US plans to privatize Iraq's economy were described by *The Economist* as a capitalist's dream: Hartnett and Stengrim (*US Invasion of Iraq* 221–66) observe that Iraq under US occupation was the epitome of crony capitalism, with non-competitive contracts awarded to contractors close to the Bush administration who were exempt from legal accountability to Iraq (218) and paid much more than Iraqi firms would have been paid for the same jobs, with their payments guaranteed by a trusteeship over Iraq's oil (257), mortgaging its future (161). Halliburton received a contract to reconstruct Iraqi oil fields that was open-ended with indefinite costs (229), while its employees were found to have taken enormous kickbacks in Iraq. Also, mercenary outfits – 'private military forces' – were hired on a large scale to assist in the profitable policing of Iraq.

⁶⁵ Simon W. Murden, *Islam, the Middle East, and the New Global Hegemony* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002); Gill, *Power and Resistance*, 115; Mark Rupert and M. Scott Soloman, *Globalization and International Political Economy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

⁶⁶ Raymond Hinnebusch, 'The Battle over Syria's Reconstruction', *Global Policy* 11:1 (2020): 113–23.

a corresponding relative regional autonomy of periphery states from the core, manifested in MENA by populist revolutions, the post-1970 restoration of the dominance of finance capital sharply widened global inequality and renewed dependency in the periphery. IMF pressure forced non-oil republics into neo-liberalism and the core's neo-liberal discourse legitimized their rulers' appropriation of the benefits (privatization) while offloading the costs onto their formerly supportive constituents. In parallel, MENA oil monarchies played a pivotal role in this and received super-rewards for their services to Anglo-American financial capital. Nevertheless, imperialism generates its antithesis, resistance, and, whether in the rise of a would-be regional oil hegemon (Iraq); transnational terrorism (al-Qaida) or pushback against vexatious sanctions regimes, this raises the possibility that 'imperial overreach' could hasten the move toward a truly multi-polar world.

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23. Environmental security in the Middle East and North Africa: approaches, policy patterns, and activism trends

Giulia Cimini¹

INTRODUCTION

Environmental security is an elusive concept, although it has increasingly entered the academic, popular and policy lexicon. It is associated with different meanings, and therefore encompasses multiple referent objects, sources of risk and scales of concern. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is no exception. Indeed, it is an emblematic case of some of the main trends in the approach to environmental security, especially in its association with violent conflicts and threats to national security, even though the concept was born as part of wider efforts to expand the breadth of security beyond its militaristic and state-centric connotations which occurred during the 1980s and were further consolidated in the post-Cold War era. This chapter provides a preliminary overview of the major interpretations of environmental security in MENA. Far from being exhaustive coverage, it is intended as an initial step towards bridging comparative politics and area studies, to emphasize the importance of better investigating the phenomenon and its facets from a wider perspective, by drawing on broader theoretical debates and the phenomenon's problematization and evolution in different contexts without forgetting concrete cases on the ground. This is even more relevant since environmental questions are no longer a marginal topic in Middle East politics,² and are becoming extremely diversified.

This chapter proceeds as follows. It first draws on the genesis and evolution of the concept of environmental security, and then addresses the lines of continuity and discontinuity of how the MENA fits into this theoretical framework. Second, it looks at how the idea of environmental security in the region is articulated in policy terms with a top-down focus, especially in the over-emphasis on green transitions that alone have captured the debate. Third, moving to a bottom-up perspective, the chapter looks at the environmental priorities for Arab citizens and how they stand in relation to other pressing concerns. It concludes with a reflection on environmental activism regionwide, understood as a way of renegotiating rights and re-appropriating public spaces, but also as evidence of the persistence of a substantial disconnect between needs from below and responses from above. The latter is, in short, the main argument of the chapter. More than an argument, to be fair, it is a hypothesis that needs further investigation, especially in comparative terms. The chapter posits, however, the importance of looking at the

¹ The author acknowledges the financial support of the Germany-based Gerda Henkel Foundation under the Special Programme 'Security, Society and the State'.

² Jeannie Sowers and Marc Lynch, Introduction to *Environmental Politics in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, DC: POMEPS, 2022).

environment as another arena for negotiation and renegotiation of faltering social contracts that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to disconnect from closely interrelated issues of social justice, state–society relations and forms of knowledge production. In this sense, the reference to the idea of security, with all the ambiguities but also the possibilities it offers, is a fundamental lens precisely to better focus on the contradictions inherent in the relations between the peoples and states in MENA and the environment.

ORIGINS AND MAJOR INTERPRETATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY

Since the 1960s, environmental security has gradually emerged as an important concept in security studies, alongside the growth of environmental consciousness and movements and environmental non-governmental organizations.³ However, from the 1970s onwards a major twist in the literature has been seen, also going hand in hand with international summits on environmental issues and the proliferation of international environmental conventions, from marine pollution to waste, from endangered species of wild fauna and flora to biological diversity, and much more. The progenitor event of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972 in fact inaugurated a number of meetings, multilateral agreements and reports which ‘popularized’ terms such as ‘sustainable development’.⁴ The publication of the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, entitled *Our common future*, introduced the notion of ‘environmental security’, which powerfully entered international debates.⁵ Notably, this influential report incorporated the perspective that situations of scarce resources, such as food shortages, water scarcity and fisheries depletion, as well as environmental disruption (climate change and deforestation, to name just a few), were very likely to induce violent conflict. Such a theorization links back to Norman Myers,⁶ one of the first academics to address what we may label the ‘conflict-environment thesis’, which still has a large following today, as the chapter will explore in more detail below. At that time, however, early scholarly attempts to challenge from an environmental standpoint the orthodox meaning and practices of security – built around state-centric and military approaches – laid the foundations for ideas such as environmental interdependence and common security, binding together environmental threats, international stability and national well-being.⁷ In so doing, they emphasized that there were common problems that required collective action. Just like migration, the environment has therefore become increasingly seen through the lens of security. As Peoples and Vaughan-Williams recall by borrowing the language of the Copenhagen School, the environment has been gradually securitized in

³ Jon Barnett and Geoff Dabelko, ‘Environmental Security’. In *Contemporary Security Studies*, ed. Allan Collins (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁴ Barnett and Dabelko, ‘Environmental Security’.

⁵ Barnett and Dabelko, ‘Environmental Security’. Maria J. Trombetta, ‘Environmental Security and Climate Change: Analysing the Discourse’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 21 (2008).

⁶ Norman Myers, ‘The Environmental Dimension to Security Issues’, *Environmentalists* 6 (1986).

⁷ Robert Falk, *This Endangered Planet: Prospects and Proposals for Human Survival* (New York: Random House, 1971); Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *Toward a Politics of Planet Heart* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1971).

public policy, academic context and media.⁸ In this sense, it has been increasingly politicized, namely, turned into a matter of 'high' politics just like more orthodox security threats. Nonetheless, although the debate had been long in the making and environmental security gained momentum in the 1980s – not by chance, given the emerging, pressing concerns of global warming and ozone depletion – it was mainly in the early 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, that the intellectual and policy space was created for environmental security to become a full-fledged part of the new 'security' agendas.⁹ Issues such as environmental degradation and water scarcity above all were increasingly incorporated into security concerns, and national security strategies.¹⁰

The securitization (and politicization) of the environment is part of a paradigmatic shift in understanding security as highlighted by so-called critical security studies. This sub-discipline is bound up with the 'broadening' and 'deepening' of the concept, whereby the former refers to the expansion to sectors other than the military and the latter to the inclusion of other entities to be secured (referent object) beyond the state.¹¹ From this standpoint, broadening security implies that the threats are no longer only military in nature but also economic, societal, political and environmental, in the classical five-dimensional approach first introduced by Barry Buzan in *People, States and Fear*.¹² Also, deepening the notion of security means that threats are not only against the state but also below and above it, that is, also against individuals, groups and even the biosphere.

As the study of security broadened and deepened away from solely state-centric militaristic concerns of the Cold War era, a number of interpretations of environmental security have emerged based on the ambiguity of the definition of both the concepts of 'environment' and 'security'. Barnett and Dabelko,¹³ for example, delineate at least six major understandings of environmental security, differing on the basis of the entity to be secured (from the natural environment to the nation state, from the armed forces to individuals), the source of risk to that entity (ranging from human activity to environmental change, from war to green groups) and the scale of concern and solutions proposed. What is sometimes called 'ecological security', for example, focuses on the impacts of human activities on the environment, thus treating the former as the main source of threat and the latter as the entity at risk.¹⁴ By contrast, according to other approaches, which focus either on common security or national security with the nation state as a referent object, or on human security with individuals at the centre, it is environmental problems such as climate change that threaten countries or peoples. Remarkably, most interpretations do not radically differ from mainstream security thought and practice, inasmuch as they focus on the nation state with a more or less explicit risk of armed conflict.

⁸ Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'Environmental Security'. In *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*, eds C. Peoples and N. Vaughan-Williams (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁹ Simon Dalby, 'Ecopolitical Discourse: "Environmental Security" and Political Geography', *Progress in Human Geography* 16 (1992).

¹⁰ Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 'Environmental Security'.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security in the Post-Cold War Era* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

¹³ Barnett and Dabelko, 'Environmental Security'.

¹⁴ Barnett and Dabelko, 'Environmental Security', 240.

For the purpose of this chapter, two considerations are relevant here. First is the connection between environmental change and violent conflict, which has been a long-standing, central concern of security studies dealing with the environment. A second consideration is as obvious as it is, paradoxically, often underestimated: ‘no two countries have exactly the same interests’¹⁵ and all differ in the extent to which they can or want to deal with ‘common’ problems.

The Middle East and North Africa region is a case in point in both of these respects, as treated in greater depth in the following two sections.

THE ENVIRONMENT–CONFLICT NEXUS AND THE MENA

With regard to the first dimension outlined above, Youness points to a substantial overlap between conventional security threats of military nature centred on nations and ‘unconventional’ security threats of environmental nature focusing on societies and individuals.¹⁶ Building on John Waterbury’s 2013 study on *The Political Economy of Climate Change in the Arab Region*,¹⁷ he argues that climate change brings along new threats to human and international security as well as to states in the shape of internal conflict, terrorism and instability, as evidenced by the examples of Syria and Darfur. The displacement of inhabitants from one area to another due to droughts and desertification contributed to the outbreak of conflict, as well as the expansion of terrorist organizations.¹⁸ The argument of conflicts over resources as a consequence of climate change, embedded in an ontology typical of the Realist school, is neither new nor exclusive to the Middle East and North Africa region where it is very praised and criticized at the same time. Discussions about environmentally induced conflicts go back to the beginnings of the broader theoretical debate on alternative security logics and the implications of securitizing the environment.

In *The Coming Anarchy*, Robert Kaplan proclaimed the environment ‘the national-security issue of the early twenty-first century’.¹⁹ In Myers’s footsteps, he reiterates the link between environmental disruption and violent outcomes by stressing how population growth has exacerbated issues such as diseases, conflicts and instability coming from environmental changes. If such problems were then confined to the ‘global south’, he posited, they would soon spread to the ‘civilization’ of the ‘global north’ in a sort of snowball effect. In a similar vein, Michael Klare’s *Resource Wars*²⁰ argue that resource scarcity and increased population account for ethnic, religious and tribal violence whereas states’ security ultimately depends on their resource supplies. This argument clearly fits into the Realist tradition of strategic studies – the classic, mainstream approach to security in international relations. The alarmist and sensationalist tone of studies on environmentally induced conflicts gained momentum and almost ‘captured’ the debate. Many, however, challenged the core argument that ecological decay is

¹⁵ Ibid., 241.

¹⁶ Mohamed A. Youness, comment on World Bank, ‘How Climate Change Contributed to the Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa’, *World Bank Blogs*, 10 December 2015, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/climate-change-conflict-mena>.

¹⁷ John Waterbury, *The Political Economy of Climate Change in the Arab Region* (UNDP, 2013).

¹⁸ Youness, ‘How Climate Change Contributed’.

¹⁹ Robert Kaplan, ‘The Coming Anarchy’, *Atlantic Monthly* 273 (1994).

²⁰ Michael T. Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002).

likely to cause inter-state conflicts, and criticized it as to its empirical validity and analytical relevance, and on normative grounds.

Thomas Homer-Dixon's seminal critique of the environment–conflict thesis largely shaped the debate at the time.²¹ He warned that the causal link between environmental scarcity and degradation (as independent variables) and violent conflict (as a dependent variable) is not straightforward. Although environmental problems may be associated with it, he pointed out, they are neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause. To sum up, Homer-Dixon argued that there is no empirical evidence that scarcity is a major cause for wars among states; rather, environmental factors are more indirect causes as they prompt, for instance, internal migration, or inter-ethnic conflict. Likewise, Trombetta recalls that the debate about environmentally induced conflict has evolved to the extent that 'research suggests that conflicts are likely to be subnational and low intensity', that is they tend to be localized instead of unfolding as violence opposing developed and developing countries.²² Moreover, to name but a few examples, she also recalls that not only have some studies demonstrated that environmental degradation often provides an opportunity for cooperation, but also that it is resource abundance rather than scarcity that determines conflicts.²³ Zooming in on the MENA scholarship, particularly indicative is the joint work edited by Werrell and Femia that investigates the links between the Arab uprisings and climate change.²⁴ While identifying a series of correlations, the authors warn against considering climate change as a direct cause of the uprisings. Instead, it would act more properly as a 'threat multiplier'²⁵ and 'stressor.'²⁶ Likewise, Daoudy is careful in resorting to simplistic linkages.²⁷

Securitizing the environment comes with a set of consequences and implications.

First, as a result of framing environmental issues in terms of violence and conflict by mimicking the logic of the Realist school, environmental factors are understood as multi-level security threats, first and foremost to the nation state (national security), and also to individuals (human security). From an analytical point of view, however, Deudney highlights substantial differences between traditional, military and environmental threats, in terms of their nature, jurisdiction and responses to be dealt with.²⁸ The former are in fact a threat to national security as such, are intentional behaviours and necessitate the response of 'secretive, extremely hierarchical, and centralized' organizations;²⁹ the latter unfold beyond state sovereignty, are largely

²¹ Thomas Homer-Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1999).

²² Trombetta, 'Environmental Security and Climate Change', 592.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Caitlin E. Werrell and Francesco Femia, eds., *The Arab Spring and Climate Change. A Climate and Security Correlations Series* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, Stimson and The Center for Climate and Security, 2013).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Anne-Marie Slaughter, Preface to *The Arab Spring and Climate Change. A Climate and Security Correlations Series* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, Stimson and The Center for Climate and Security, 2013).

²⁷ Marwa Daoudy, *The Origins of the Syrian Conflict: Climate Change and Human Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

²⁸ Daniel Deudney, 'Environmental Security: A Critique', in *Contested Grounds: Security and Conflict in the New Environmental Politics*, ed. Daniel Deudney and Richard Mathews (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

²⁹ Deudney, 'Environmental Security', 193–4.

unintentional harming activities and call for global, collective action. That is why Deudney is sceptical about the securitization of the environment.

Second, and also challenging the empirical and analytical validity of the claims of the environment–security nexus as set out by the conflict thesis, some also criticize the normative implications of such an approach. In particular, scholars such as Barnett³⁰ and Dalby³¹ draw attention to the imagery it outlines, and how this approach glosses over relevant ethical and political issues (such as colonial histories) which reproduce structural inequalities in the distribution of resources globally. In a way, by pointing to environment-related risks coming from the ‘Global South’ or the ‘Third World’, this narrative reproduces stereotypical images of ‘Others’ associated with barbarism and violence.³² Not least, it acts as a way to erase the responsibility of developed countries.³³ Zooming in on the Middle East and North Africa, these considerations are very pertinent. Hoffmann has recently highlighted a sort of ‘environmental orientalism’ when it comes to discussing the political ecology of the MENA region, portrayed as ‘fragile, alien and hostile’.³⁴ In other words, an orientalist legacy remains which overstates that scarce nature is deterministically mismanaged by societies and states that are overall incapable of negotiating modernity inputs.³⁵ With these premises, old colonial tropes reactivate, to the extent that environmental degradation and arid wilderness is attributed to indigenous activities and can be remedied by foreign expertise so as to justify colonial enterprises.³⁶ In this way, (neo)colonial interventions are legitimized in a new form, through mega-development projects such as avant-garde solar power plants following a vision of progress and development, without even considering trade-offs for local communities.³⁷ Over the past decade, in fact, an increasing number of scholars of MENA (or, more appropriately, South West Asian/ North African) politics have been engaging with issues of environmental exploitation, especially in ‘peripheral’ territories,³⁸ as byproducts of neoliberal, state-led and international donor-driven policies, and as the manifestation of neocolonial practices. Therefore, securitizing the environment, even more so in connection of a sort of environmental orientalism, is by no means neutral in terms of knowledge production.

³⁰ Michael Barnett, *The Meaning of Environmental Security: Ecological Politics and Policy in the New Security Era* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2001).

³¹ Simon Dalby, *Environmental Security* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

³² See also Trombetta, ‘Environmental Security and Climate Change’ on this point.

³³ Trombetta, ‘Environmental Security and Climate Change’.

³⁴ Clemens Hoffmann, ‘Environmental Determinism as Orientalism: The Geo-political Ecology of Crisis in the Middle East’, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 31 (2018).

³⁵ Hoffmann, ‘Environmental Determinism as Orientalism’.

³⁶ Diana K. Davis, *The Arid Lands: History, Power, Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015); Diana K. Davis, and Edmund Burke, eds, *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011).

³⁷ Khaoula Bengezi, ‘New Constructions of Environmental Orientalism: Climate Change Mitigation Solar Power Projects in the Sahara Desert’, in *Environmental Politics in the Middle East and North Africa*. POMEPS Studies 46, May 2022.

³⁸ Ángela Suárez Collado, ‘The Amazigh Movement in Morocco: New Generations, New References of Mobilization and New Forms of Opposition’, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 6 (2013); Brecht De Smet and Soraya El Kahlaoui, ‘Putting the Margins at the Centre: At the Edges of Protest in Morocco and Egypt’, *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 14 (2021).

Last, and beyond these criticisms, however, some have also emphasized the positive aspects of the environment–security nexus, whether we consider environmental factors as objective threats from a Realist perspective or as socially constructed threats according to a constructivist reading and the securitization approach of the Copenhagen School. Indeed, while framing environmental issues in the more familiar language of threats to national security captured a broader debate and reduced the breadth of innovation, it also had the effect – difficult to say how intentional – of legitimizing environmental discourse³⁹ by drawing states’ attention to problems that would otherwise be left unaddressed.⁴⁰ In other words, securitizing the environment raised its profile.

A POLICY APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY: WHAT GREEN TRANSITIONS?

Moving from the theoretical and conceptual level to practices on the ground, another key dimension to consider here is the variety of interests and actions at stake resulting in heterogeneity on the public policy front. Environmental initiatives at the regional level remain fragmented, not unlike other regional initiatives of regional cooperation. Competing and different conceptions of existing and emerging threats, inter-Arab rivalries fuelling enmity and mistrust, and a narrow conception of militaristic security are held responsible for failures in developing a working collective security scheme.⁴¹ In a way, these obstacles to regional integration have marked a weak ‘security complex’, to borrow Buzan and Waever’s notorious definition.⁴² If this is true in general terms when it comes to security, most often understood in traditional terms, the same applies to environmental security. We are not saying anything new when we remember that, even in the context of an interdependent world, the global or regional scale of concern about environmental issues – climate change above all – does not mean that all countries are equally responsible for them or equally at risk from them. Moreover, just as it is true that environmental issues transcend state boundaries, especially those related to climate change, it is equally reasonable to say that some are much more localized, and related to issues of (bad) governance and resource redistribution (for example, waste management and overexploitation of lands and water for intensive export crops that cause structural resource deficits for local populations).

It is inevitable, therefore, that when talking about environment and security, we are confronted with a variety of policies reflecting different needs and interests. This is especially true if we think about green transitions, which are in the spotlight more than other issues. While many countries in the MENA region realize the imperative to change, every country is at a different point in its journey. Across the region, solar, wind and nuclear energy projects are already under way. Among Middle Eastern states, frontrunner countries such as

³⁹ Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, ‘Environmental Security’; Trombetta, ‘Environmental Security and Climate Change’.

⁴⁰ Deudney, *Environmental Security*.

⁴¹ Eman Ragab, *An Alternative Approach to Regional Security in the Middle East*. The Cairo Review of Global Affairs (2020) www.thecaireview.com/essays/an-alternative-approach-to-regional-security-in-the-middle-east/.

⁴² Barry Buzan, and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia – whose economies are built on extracting and processing fossil fuels – are investing heavily in clean energy and committed to decarbonizing and diversifying their energy sectors not to lose their energy leadership status. In particular, they have clearly expressed their ambitions of becoming leaders in the hydrogen economy. This is a major change as Arab states have long been poorly represented at the Conference of the Parties (COP) summits, which is indicative of the lack of importance long accorded to issues of climate change by their decision-makers. In the two decades leading up to the 2015 Conference of the Parties in Paris (COP21), the Arab League mandated Saudi Arabia to represent it as the spearhead for the Arab group at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), whereby Riyadh notoriously acted as a blocker in the negotiations for the Paris Agreement that arose out of COP21.

For example, taking the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) presented (or not) by countries in view of the COP21 as indicators of each country's level of commitment to climate change policies, varied goals and levels of engagement (and advancement) clearly emerge. The major oil-producing countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), also the major polluters, were more 'hesitant' in delineating their mitigation and adaptation policies. Notably, their heads of states did not even attend the COP21 Summit, nor the signing ceremony of the Paris Agreement some months later in New York. Saudi Arabia and Qatar (which has the highest carbon footprint per capita) opted for conditional engagements having economic diversification and mitigation co-benefits at their core.⁴³

In the Mediterranean basin, it is Morocco which seeks to leverage its geographic proximity to Europe to export green hydrogen. At the same time, it was the first Arab country to submit its INDC, whose proposal are rooted in national priorities and policies. The country has committed itself to achieving 52 per cent renewable energy by 2030, while by 2050 it expects 100 per cent of its energy consumption to be green. Although this risks sounding like an overly rosy prospectus, the Alaouite Kingdom has become a regional benchmark in this area, and it is currently Africa's leader regarding efforts to combat pressing climate change. Renewable energy has been high on Rabat's agenda since the 2000s. Evidence of its ambitious and successful policy is the fact that the country hosts the world's largest solar complex (the Noor power plant in Ouarzazate). It is important to note that the expansion of renewables has been strongly driven by outside demand, and it is very much a centralized process with the clear backing of the monarchy.⁴⁴ In line with its pivot towards Africa and commitment to 'South-South' cooperation, Morocco has increasingly boosted its soft power in the environmental sector, not unlike the religious sphere.⁴⁵ Moreover, its leadership role in environmental policies goes far beyond the regional dimension. In fact, Morocco takes one of the top places in the Climate Change Performance Index 2022 worldwide, right after Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the

⁴³ Rana El Hajj, 'How Serious Are Arab Countries about Climate Change? A New Era of Climate Change Policy', in *A Region Heating Up: Climate Change Activism in the Middle East and North Africa* (Beirut, Rabat, Ramallah, and Tunis: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2016), 2–5.

⁴⁴ The green energy transition and its ambitious targets are in fact managed by the semi-public Moroccan Agency for Sustainable Energy (AMED, *Agence marocaine pour l'énergie durable*) linked to the royal family and the publicly owned National Office of Electricity and Drinking Water (ONEE, *Office national de l'électricité et de l'eau potable*) which basically have a monopoly on the power grid.

⁴⁵ Salim Hmimnat, 'Morocco's Religious "Soft Power" in Africa', *Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis*, 6 June 2018.

United Kingdom.⁴⁶ Remarkably, it hosted the Climate Change Summit in 2016 (COP22) right after the Paris Agreement. On the margins of COP22, King Mohammed VI convened the first Africa Action Summit and launched a number of transnational projects and commissions to explore innovative ways to address key climate challenges in the continent. In the Maghreb, whereas Morocco takes the lion's share of energy, traditional energy giant Algeria has recently embarked on ambitious energy diversification programmes. Tunisia has been slower to take up such work; this latter, however, should be highly interested in developing renewable energies given its dependency on natural gas imports. Moreover, Tunisia is the first country in the region to recognize climate change in its 2014 constitution,⁴⁷ guaranteeing the right to a healthy and balanced environment and the right to participate in the protection of the climate (see Article 45).⁴⁸ Moving East, countries such as Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan are working on green transitions. Egypt is much more focused on adaptation and building resilience than other countries, while Lebanon still lacks a national climate change strategy and has a scattered approach rooted in several sectoral policies.⁴⁹ Although it set ambitious goals, such as the unconditional target of a 15 per cent reduction in national greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, the key difficulty seems to be translating this into action. Aware of its high dependence on energy imports, Jordan was the first Arab country to specifically develop a national climate change policy in 2013.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Jordan's INDC is considered not as ambitious as it could have been.

A key aspect of green transitions is, however, too often underestimated. Green transition is not just about decarbonization, investment in new technologies and facilities, but involves rethinking production structures and mindsets. It also has a strong equity and fairness dimension. In fact, a core yet still largely underexplored pillar of the *green* transition as a new developmental paradigm is that of *just* transition. It should be noted, for example, that *Leave no one behind* is one of the mottos of the EU Green Deal; this will have profound geopolitical repercussions in its neighbourhood, included some MENA countries. It follows that talking about green – hence just – transitions towards renewable energies and sustainable ways of production shall not be done, at least in theory, in isolation from socio-economic but also civil rights such as jobs, infrastructure development, wealth redistribution and the right to health. This also entails addressing specific local grievances, as well as questions of access to natural resources, resource governance and management, resource sovereignty and the renegotiation of social contracts. Instead, current state-led discourses about the environment in the MENA countries, and even more state-led 'environmental projects', seem overwhelmingly concerned with an approach of environmental security centred on either the dimension of national security or the security of the regime, which do not always meet the needs of environmentalism from below. Before illustrating how the interconnections between environmental issues, justice and governance play out on the ground, like a spider's web, it is worth considering what environmental issues are perceived by the grassroots, at least to the extent that they are captured by surveys.

⁴⁶ See the CCPI (Climate Change Performance Index) Ranking 2022 available at: <https://ccpi.org/ranking/>. (Last accessed on 23 May 2022).

⁴⁷ Haykel Ben Mahfoudh, 'Tunisie', *Annuaire international de justice constitutionnelle* 35 (2019).

⁴⁸ The new 2022 constitution maintained the same provision at Article 47.

⁴⁹ El Hajj, 'How Serious Are Arab Countries about Climate Change?'

⁵⁰ Ibid.

MENA CITIZENS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

A 2017 public opinion survey carried out by the Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED) in all the 22 countries which are members in the League of Arab States revealed that a majority of approximately 61 per cent of respondents believes that the environment has deteriorated over the past ten years, reflecting findings of a similar AFED survey in 2006.⁵¹ The remainder is almost equally divided in believing that the situation has remained the same or improved.⁵² The latter, more positive outlook mainly concerns the United Arab Emirates, the only country where a majority of just over 50 per cent thought that the environment is being improved.

Despite an increase in environmental awareness,⁵³ it must be borne in mind that compared with other issues, environmental issues are still a secondary concern. Asked about the most important challenges their countries are facing today in Wave 4 of the Arab Barometer,⁵⁴ the vast majority of Arab citizens are concerned about the economic situation, including poverty, unemployment and price increases. This follows financial and administrative corruption.⁵⁵ At a glance, pollution and broader environmental concerns appear only in limited percentages as top priorities, and in a few countries in the same Wave.⁵⁶ For example, 0.4 per cent of those surveyed in Jordan mention the lack of natural resources, while in Morocco 2.5 per cent quote limited natural resources and 5.6 per cent natural disasters. In Tunisia, 1.7 per cent and 1.5 per cent complain about pollution and the need to take control of national natural resources, respectively. Lastly, only 0.3 per cent of Lebanese respondents are primarily concerned about environmental issues. Likewise, taking a look at Arab Barometer's Wave 5, answers about ranking the most pressing challenges do not include environmental issues. More recently, moreover, according to Arab Barometer's 2020–1 surveys, environmental protection does not arise as a public priority.⁵⁷ Instead, top priorities for government spending are the education and healthcare systems (unsurprisingly, perhaps, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic).

The fact that the environment does not appear among the 'hot' dossiers, neither as a perceived threat or challenge nor as a priority that citizens would like to see addressed, does not imply neglect *tout court*.

Wave 5 of the Arab Barometer devoted a series of questions to the perceived seriousness of climate change, air quality, water pollution and trash.⁵⁸ Having been explicitly asked about them, it turns out that 70 per cent of Arab citizens considered water pollution to be the most

⁵¹ Najib Saab, 'Arab Public Opinion and the Environment', in *Arab Environment in Ten Years*, ed. Najib Saab, 2017.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Najib Saab, 'Environmental Awareness in Arab Countries: A Survey', *EcoMENA*. February 20, 2021.

⁵⁴ Arab Barometer, 'Data Analysis Tool: Wave IV', 2016.

⁵⁵ However, please note that these issues are all proposed by the interviewer as possible answers. By contrast, 'environmental issues' are listed not among the assisted responses.

⁵⁶ The following percentages are derived from spontaneous responses to the questions 'What are the two most important challenges your country is facing today? (Other mentions)', and are filtered by Wave and by selecting all (available) countries.

⁵⁷ Arab Barometer. 'What MENA Citizens Think about the Environment in 11 Graphs'. Arab Barometer, March 24, 2022.

⁵⁸ Arab Barometer. *Environmental Issues in the Middle East and North Africa*. Arab Barometer – Wave V Topic Report. October 2019.

serious of environmental issues, followed by trash, identified as such by 66 per cent of the respondents.⁵⁹ In comparison, air quality and climate change are viewed as less important as around 44 per cent and 35 per cent of citizens are concerned about them. Notably, it is mainly Libya, Iraq and Tunisia that are worried about water pollution and waste, while Lebanon is the most alarmed about climate change.

That said, some considerations are necessary.

Although these surveys provide a very much needed overview of the main environmental challenges in the region, we currently have a partial view of the degree to which they are perceived as priorities compared to other issues. Data are partial for a number of reasons: first, because of the lack of time series; second, because the environment is not included in the assisted response basket of main challenges; and, third, as some countries are excluded from the Arab Barometer surveys – notably the GCC, for example. This does not mean, however, that there are no country-by-country studies conducted by other institutes, both local and international. In this case, however, a systematic comparison obviously becomes more problematic.

In addition to the quantitative dimension, further qualitative studies could enrich our understanding of environmental issues, including environmental security. We could start with what citizens understand by ‘environment’. For example, a 2017 report issued by the Heinrich-Böll Stiftung on the results of a survey on the environmental situation in Tunisia shows that citizens associate the environment mainly with rubbish (almost 56 per cent) in open-ended answers. Next comes pollution (‘only’ 6.4 per cent).⁶⁰ Likewise, when asked about how sensitive they are to the environment, almost 60 per cent of Tunisians answer they are ‘very sensitive’ to it, and 25 per cent ‘quite sensitive’. However, in the list of priorities for the country, the environment ranks very low, at 0.6 per cent. At the same time, dissatisfaction with various public institutions in the management of the environment is very high. Although it is not possible to generalize from a single case, it is nevertheless interesting to ask to what extent there are similar ‘contradictions’ in other countries, in order to better understand the notion of ‘environment’ itself, the level of environmental risk awareness, how much the priorities of citizens differ from those of their rulers, and the extent and type of environmental activism locally.

WHAT SECURITY? EXPLORING PATTERNS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

Following the 2010–11 Arab uprisings, environmental activism has been intensifying in the region.⁶¹ As Arab publics demanded voice and representation, they took advantage of the political openings resulting from the so-called “Arab Spring” to organize at grassroots level for their environmental rights as well.⁶² To be sure, environmental activism, especially focused on issues that affect public health and livelihoods, is by no means a new phenomenon. Yet, it has

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Heinrich-Böll Stiftung, *Résultats du sondage d'opinion sur la situation environnementale en Tunisie*. February 2017.

⁶¹ Harry Verhoeven, ed., *Environmental Politics in the Middle East: Local Struggles, Global Connections* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁶² Aziza Moneer, ‘Environmental Activism in The Post-Arab Spring: It Is Not About a Mere Clean Environment,’ in *Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors*, February 2020.

intensified in recent decades.⁶³ After all, a growing number of scholars have more explicitly addressed the linkages of environmental politics, social contestation and governance in the MENA region.⁶⁴

Taking to the streets is but one form of manifestation of environmental activism, but it is certainly the most visible and far-reaching. However, defining a physiognomy of environmental-related protests is not an easy task, for a number of reasons.

First, they usually encompass a wide variety of ‘environmental’ issues, ranging from water stress, land degradation, pollution and waste to land dispossession and the overexploitation of mining and fishing resources, to mention just a few. More broadly, highly controversial is the access to the country’s natural resources – be they the coastline or the subsoil, oases or urban green spaces – and their protection not only from climate change but also and above all from human action and from privatization. Here it is evident how different conceptions of environmental security unfold, with the environment being both a source of risk (such as environmental change) and the entity to be secured (such as its natural resources).

Second, they differ widely in their geographic outreach. They very often remain spatially confined episodes and refer to site-specific advocacy, sometimes rise to the level of national issues and also draw attention on a regional and international scale.

Third, they are also distinguished by their duration and intensity. Being so varied for the concerned issue-areas and scattered across countries, environmental activism in the shape of protests is not easy to map. Even less easy is disentangling it from a plurality of other pressing issues that are not primarily related to the environment, however ambiguous its definition remains. A fourth crucial aspect in ‘typifying’ environmental protests is, in fact, their intersectionality; more precisely, the ways in which environmental issues meet, or even clash, with the right to health, work, redistribution and social justice. In this line of reasoning, two additional aspects are worth noting. The way in which the environment overlaps with issues of marginalization and, entwined with problems of mismanagement and exploitation, reinforces claims against the system and the regime.

To put all these remarks into context, countless examples can be mentioned across the MENA region. Water stress is certainly among the most sensitive issues. Jordan is probably the best known case of structural crises related to water scarcity. Yet, national protests largely eschewed environmental claims which have instead remained geographically hyper-localized in some peripheral regions and rural communities.⁶⁵ Such a condition can be explained, some argue, due to the government’s successful securitization discourse which blames the water problem on individual consumption habits and foreign forces such as Israel, thus preventing it from becoming a rallying factor for discontent and mobilization, at least on a national scale.⁶⁶

⁶³ Jeannie Sowers. ‘Environmental Activism in the Middle East and North Africa’. In *Environmental Politics in the Middle East: Local Struggles, Global Connections*, ed. Harry Verhoeven (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Nicholas Hopkins, ed., *Environmental Challenges in Egypt and the World* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1992). Jeannie Sowers, *Environmental Politics in Egypt: Activists, Experts, and the State* (London: Routledge, 2012). Sowers, ‘Environmental Activism’.

⁶⁵ Taraf Abu Hamdan, ‘Soil, Dirt, Earth: Deserts, Rural Communities, and Power in Jordan’ in *Environmental Politics in the Middle East and North Africa*. POMEPS Studies 46, May 2022.

⁶⁶ Jérémie Langlois and Marwa Daoudy, ‘Words, Water, and Waste: How Government Discourse Shapes Environmental Protest in Lebanon and Jordan’. In *Environmental Politics in the Middle East and North Africa*. POMEPS Studies 46, May 2022.

Comparing the Jordanian case with Lebanon, where, on the contrary, concerns around water, trash and disaster management led to large-scale mass mobilization in a broader critique of the government's legitimacy, this argument has good explanatory potential as it addresses the question of why, despite a similar set of environmental challenges, countries witness varying degrees of environmental mobilization. Also, it interestingly reminds us of the narrative 'construction' of a threat, and the process of securitizing or de-securitizing environmental issues. According to the constructivist school, threats, including environmental ones, are the result of discursive processes rather than objective facts. From this perspective, it can be argued that the Jordanian state, by leveraging its prevailing domestic and international security concerns, manages not to be held responsible for the water problem despite it being a feature of everyday life.

Broadly speaking, water scarcity has lent itself greatly to associations with security themes. In fact, the idea that countries might fight over shared waterways and water scarcity in the so-called 'water wars' is extremely popular among politicians, journalists, some academics and NGOs. This narrative particularly fits the securitizing move of environmental issues and the environment–conflict thesis discussed above, which often conflates risk factors or concurrent factors with direct causal relationships. As Barnett and Dabelko recall, some authors have demonstrated that countries seem more likely to cooperate than fight over water, globally and including the Middle East.⁶⁷ Overstating water scarcity, furthermore, may obscure the responsibility of national and international actors such as state authorities, local elites and private corporations in mismanaging natural assets, thus precluding fair access. Far from denying that certain resources are at risk, the aim here is to emphasize human co-responsibility, sometimes unconscious, sometimes not. While arid and semi-arid climatic conditions may make the problem of water scarcity seem unsurprising in the MENA region, it is crucial to note that the point is not scarcity alone, but also mismanagement and precise political choices. A problem that becomes more acute, of course, with the hot season and rising temperatures. Such was the case with the July 2021 protests in Iran: the lack of rain and drought coupled with the building of hydro-electric dams and farming of water-intensive products such as rice, wheat and sugar cane sparked anger and protests among the local population in the south-western province of Khuzestan, inflamed by a heatwave with temperatures of up to 50C. Similarly, the 'thirst revolts' in Morocco erupted in the autumn of 2017 in Zagora, a city close to the desert, over chronic water shortages produced by the systematic exploitation of sparse resources for agriculture by big farmers to the detriment of local inhabitants, especially the cultivation of watermelons and other water-intensive productions destined for export. It is emblematic, furthermore, that even areas that are supposed to be rich in water, due to rainfall or the presence of springs, do not benefit from it and are instead experiencing rationing or systematic shortages, as evidenced by the 2016 summer-long protests throughout Tunisia starting from the Jendouba governorate which supplies water to the rest of the country. As Habib Ayeb's documentary *Om Layoun* (2021) denounces, this is partly due to regional disputes, whereby some regions get water at the expense of others, or sectoral disputes between industrial and agricultural sectors. Also, it may be the result of development policies pursued by the state which systematically prioritize exports over small farmers, rural populations or ecology. In any case, poor redistribution and ad hoc planning take the lion's share in accounting for these deficiencies

⁶⁷ Barnett and Dabelko, 'Environmental Security'.

and selective benefits rather than ‘scarcity’ per se. As with water, the same can be said of many other resources. In this sense, environmental issues directly speak to the broader matter of dysfunctional governance, evolving into claims of a broader political nature and calling into question the government’s legitimacy. Suffice it to think here to the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul. Primarily started by environmentalists to protest against a shopping mall project on a small yet symbolic central urban park, they then turned into a countrywide resistance movement which challenged Erdoğan’s authoritarian tendencies and the hyper-developmental environmental and urban policies of his government.⁶⁸ Notorious also is Beirut’s ‘You stink’ campaign in 2015. Far from being confined to decrying the incapability of the administration to collect garbage in the capital and its surroundings, it evolved from the very beginning to a full-fledged national movement against political corruption and the sectarian system which allowed its proliferation.

While some bottom-up contentious protests ‘upgraded’ to the level of nationwide movements, others remained more circumscribed. However, they have equally and increasingly developed in an intersectional manner, if not more so at a smaller scale. For example, by bringing together environmental issues with labour claims and especially lack of job, underdevelopment, misrecognition and even neocolonialism, some also led to the gradual emergence of cross-class and cross-ideological convergences. Interesting is the mobilization of the ‘Popular Committee Against Shale Gas’ which arose in Algeria’s Saharan town of Ouargla in 2014 and 2015 as a telling case of coalition building between a movement of unemployed and environmental activists against governmental fracking plans. Although the coalition finally split up, it brought together horizontal networks of middle-class citizens concerned about the occurrence of an ecological disaster and unemployed and precarious workers calling for their recruitment into public oil companies. Albeit so different, for a while they put aside their diverging long-term interests to voice their sense of relative deprivation and marginalization and denounce regional disparities.⁶⁹ Indeed, the anti-fracking issue became a unifying cause, and very political insofar as ‘it posed the question of citizen’s inclusion in decision making processes, national sovereignty and the crisis of corrupt and authoritarian governance’.⁷⁰ This is far from an isolated case in the region. While each has its own specific breadth, duration, intensity and demands, relevant to different circumstances, many local contestations and fights all represent the struggle of marginalized communities for inclusion and recognition through an accumulation of grievances. In areas marked by a legacy of neglect if not a past of repression by both colonial and post-colonial authorities, protesting against a deliberate politics of ‘exclusion’ by the state is the common thread. Mobilizations such as the *Hirak* (‘movement’) of the Rif and Jerada in Morocco are also exemplary of this dynamic. In the northern Rif region, whose inhabitants, mostly ethnic Berbers, have long defied the monarchy, as well as the colonial powers before it, demonstrations were sparked at the end of October 2016 in the town of Al-Hoceima over the death of Mouchine Fikri, a 31-year-old fishmonger who was crushed to death in the trash compactor he had jumped into in order to retrieve his merchandise, which the police had previously confiscated. Taking the lead from the mobilization against official

⁶⁸ Ayşem Mert, ‘The Trees in Gezi Park: Environmental Policy as the Focus of Democratic Protests’, *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 21 (2019).

⁶⁹ Naoual Belakhdar, ‘When Unemployment Meets Environment. The Case of the Anti-Fracking Coalition in Ouargla’, *Mediterranean Politics* 24 (2019).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 437.

abuses and humiliation, the *Hirak* articulated demands concerning social service provision and economic issues. Among other key demands beyond redistribution, however, stand the end to the region's militarization in place since a *dahir* (royal decree) of 1958, and the recognition of a 'disaster area' status, given also its seismic nature.⁷¹ In addition to that, the development of infrastructures to re-integrate the area (with better roads and railway), a university and a specialized hospital for cancer, as the region still suffers from the consequences of harmful gas used to suppress past rebellion; the restructuring of the fishing and agricultural sector and tourism facilities, and more broadly, public investment.⁷² Triggered by an equally dramatic and contingent event imbued with a shared narrative of social exclusion, local population in the eastern mining town of Jerada rose up against the lack of decent employment after two young brothers, Houcine and Jedouane Dioui, died in a clandestine coal mine in December 2017. In the absence of viable economic alternatives, the 'mines of death' – infamous for their unsafe and risky conditions – are the only opportunity for many people to make ends meet.

Still in Morocco, the flagship Maghrebi country of green transitions, symptomatic is the emergence of 'environmental' protests against major state-led development projects precisely because of redistribution concerns. The Noor Project, the largest solar plant worldwide, significantly undermined the access to water of local communities. By doing so, this kind of project may be in direct conflict with the local interests on the ground, thus reinforcing pre-existing disconnect and conflicts between the state and local communities.⁷³

CONCLUSION

From Tangiers to Tehran, social contestation linked to environmental issues has often intersected with a plurality of issues, including social justice, labour, health, marginalization and new forms of neo-colonialism that challenge the legitimacy of regimes. In this dense web of claims, old and new, extrapolating exclusively environmental issues is misleading if not unhelpful in making sense of what is happening on the ground – especially since, while Arab citizens show varying degrees of interest and concern about the environment, it cannot be forgotten that it is other challenges, economic ones *in primis*, that are of greater concern. On the other hand, the regimes' interest in the environment, where present, manifests itself mainly in terms of green transitions and highly centralized and often hetero-directed development projects, which struggle to find immediate positive spillovers on local communities where they do not directly conflict. In this sense, the environment becomes in its own right an arena for renegotiation, of rights and social contracts. Above all, it becomes an emblematic case for problematizing notions of security (security for whom? security from what?). As few other areas, when it comes to environmental security, the environment, individuals and states,

⁷¹ Sawt Chaabe, 'وثيقة مطالب الحراك الشعبي بإقليم الحسيمة' [Demands of the Popular Movement in the Region of Al Hoceima], *جريدة صوت الشعب* [The Voice of the People], 15 January 2017.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Sylvia I. Bergh and Daniele Rossi Doria, 'Plus Ça Change? Observing the Dynamics of Morocco's 'Arab Spring' in the High Atlas', *Mediterranean Politics* 20 (2015). Koenraad Bogaert, 'Paradigms Lost in Morocco: How Urban Mega-Projects Should Disturb Our Understanding of Arab Politics', *Jadaliyya*, 4 June 2015. www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32156. Habib Ayeb and Ray Bush, *Food Insecurity and Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa. Agrarian Questions in Egypt and Tunisia* (London: Anthem Press, 2019).

among others, can be both security threats and entities to be secured. Somehow, securitizing the environment has increased its relevance. Yet, many contradictions remain and a more systematic analysis of environmental issues in the area is needed, especially in comparative terms.

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