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# **Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War**

**F. Gregory Gause III**

BEYOND SECTARIANISM:  
THE NEW MIDDLE EAST COLD WAR

F. GREGORY GAUSE, III

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The best framework for understanding the regional politics of the Middle East is as a cold war in which Iran and Saudi Arabia play the leading roles. These two main actors are not confronting each other militarily; rather, their contest for influence plays out in the domestic political systems of the region's weak states. It is a struggle over the direction of the Middle East's domestic politics more than it is a purely military contest. The military and political strength of the parties to civil conflicts, and the contributions that outsiders can make to that strength, is more important than the military balance of power between Riyadh and Tehran.

This "new" Middle East cold war shares important structural similarities with the 1950s and 1960s conflicts that Malcolm Kerr famously dubbed "the Arab cold war." The power of the major protagonists in the Arab cold war was measured in their ability to affect domestic political struggles in neighboring states where weak regimes had trouble controlling their own societies and local players sought regional allies against their own domestic opponents. Non-state actors played major roles. The contending camps themselves were not always united, with tactical alliances crossing what appeared to be the lines of conflict. The great powers were important participants but not the drivers of events. The "struggle for Syria" was a key element of the Arab cold war. The new Middle East cold war shares every one of these characteristics.

The current confrontation has an important sectarian element, but it cannot be accurately understood simply as a "Sunni versus Shia" fight. Applying such a framework can

distort analytical focus, oversimplify regional dynamics, and cause Iran and Saudi Arabia's motives to be misunderstood. Riyadh and Tehran are playing a balance of power game. They are using sectarianism in that game, but both have crossed the sectarian fault line in seeking regional allies. The regional cold war can only be understood by appreciating the links between domestic conflicts, transnational affinities, and regional state ambitions. It is the weakening of Arab states, more than sectarianism or the rise of Islamist ideologies, that has created the battlefields of the new Middle East cold war. Indeed, it is the arc of state weakness and state failure running from Lebanon through Syria to Iraq that explains the current salience of sectarianism. Given how difficult it will be to reconstruct stable political orders in these and other weak states, the likelihood is that the new cold war will be as protracted as the Arab cold war was.

When the Arab Spring began, Iran had been on a winning streak in the Middle East cold war. The Saudis were on the defensive, and the Arab Spring, especially with the fall of the Mubarak regime, seemed to be yet another setback in their efforts to confront Iranian influence. This is why Syria became so central to Saudi Arabia. By the start of 2012, Riyadh was "all in" for the rebellion. How the Syrian crisis ends will largely determine Middle Eastern perceptions of who "won" this round of the contest for regional influence.

Axes of conflict in cold wars are never simply bilateral, and the same is true of the new Middle East cold war. The Saudis, the Muslim Brotherhood and its regional allies, al-Qaeda

and its affiliates, the emergent Islamic State, and other Sunni groups are locked in a conflict over what the proper political role of Islam should be in the Sunni world. The Arab upheavals of 2011 were fundamentally about the basis of legitimate rule in the Arab world. The combination of democracy and Islamist politics represented by the electoral success of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia's Ennahda was unsettling to the Saudi leadership. Saudi tensions with the Muslim Brotherhood did not start with the Arab Spring, but the aftermath brought that hostility to the surface. The inability of Turkey and Saudi Arabia to form a powerful axis can also be attributed, in part, to an intra-Sunni Islamist dispute over political order. Even within the Salafi camp there are serious divisions.

A final aspect of the new Middle East cold war is the paradox of power. A state's own military power is not a particularly useful tool. Instead, the key is to be able to support non-state actors effectively in their domestic political battles within the weak states of the Arab world. Effective patronage of regional allies requires transnational ideological and political connections that make potential clients open to a relationship with the patron. That is why Israel and Turkey have not been able to play very effectively in the cold war, while Qatar has had an outsized influence.

The United States can do little to address the weakness of governing institutions in many Arab states that has caused the new Middle East cold war's complex of conflicts. It therefore needs to take a modest approach and recall that this is not America's war. The conflicts have not seriously impaired America's core regional interests. The guiding principle of the American response should be to prefer order over chaos, and thereby support the states that provide effective governance, even when that governance does not achieve preferred levels of democracy and human rights. That means, among other things: 1) exploring every avenue to a new relationship with the

Rouhani government in Iran, 2) ensuring that the Islamic State's momentum is reversed before pressuring Nouri al-Maliki to be more inclusive, 3) continuing to engage with the emerging military government in Egypt, and 4) supporting traditional allies like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states. These policies are certainly "inconsistent" when viewed through the lens of the new Middle East cold war, but the United States needs to focus on its core regional interests as it defines them, not as regional powers see them. Concentrating American policy on the states that actually govern, acting multilaterally, and remembering that U.S. interests are not as directly engaged as those of the local parties are the keys to riding out the new Middle East cold war.

## INTRODUCTION

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The best framework for understanding the complicated and violent regional politics of the Middle East is as a cold war among a number of regional players, both states and non-state actors, in which Iran and Saudi Arabia play the leading roles. It is a cold war because these two main actors are not confronting and most probably will not confront each other militarily. Rather, their contest for influence plays out in the domestic political systems of the region's weak states. It is a struggle over the direction of the Middle East's domestic politics more than a purely military contest. The military and political strength of parties to civil wars, and the contributions that outsiders can make to that strength, is more important than the military balance between Riyadh and Tehran. This struggle predates the Arab uprisings of 2011, but that profound regional upheaval has opened up new arenas in which the Middle East cold war is being played out. There are also important conflict axes that fall outside the main Saudi-Iranian contest for influence. Saudi Arabia also sees itself locked in a contest with the Muslim Brotherhood (and to some extent Qatar, as a state patron of the Brotherhood) over the direction of domestic politics in the Sunni Muslim states of the Arab world.

This is a "new" Middle East cold war because it shares important structural similarities with the Middle East regional conflicts of the 1950s and

1960s, what the late Malcolm Kerr famously dubbed "the Arab cold war."<sup>1</sup> Then, Gamal Abd al-Nasir used the new technology of the day, transistor radio, to rally Arab nationalist support against ruling regimes in Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere. Nasir squared off against the "reactionary" monarchs in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, but also tangled with fellow Arab nationalist "progressives" like Abd al-Karim Qasim in Iraq and the Ba'ath Party in Syria. It was not the power of Egypt's army that made Nasir influential. The one time he deployed it in service of spreading his influence in the Arab world, in Yemen, the results were disastrous. His military brinksmanship with the Israelis in 1967 was even more damaging, in effect ending his regional leadership role. It was his ability to mobilize support across borders and in the domestic politics of other Arab states that made him the leading force in Arab politics from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s.

The new Middle East cold war goes beyond the Arab world.<sup>2</sup> Iran is a major protagonist. Turkey has made a bid for a greater regional role. It is not an ideological battle of "progressives" versus "reactionaries." The line-ups are less ideological and more identity-based. Yet the similarities are striking. The power of the major protagonists in the Arab cold war was measured in their ability to affect domestic

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> A number of analysts have asserted that the current upheaval is best understood as taking place within an Arab, rather than a Middle Eastern, context, because the core element of the regional upheaval is in being able to define what is legitimate within the context of an Arab political identity. See particularly Morten Valbjorn and Andre Bank, "The New Arab Cold War: Rediscovering the Arab Dimension of Middle East Regional Politics," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (January 2012): 3-24; Curtis Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria," *Middle East Report* 42, no. 262 (Spring 2012), <<http://www.merip.org/mer/mer262/new-arab-cold-war-struggle-syria>>; and Nabeel Khoury, "The Arab Cold War Revisited: The Regional Impact of the Arab Uprising," *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2013), 73-87.

political struggles in neighboring states, where weak regimes had trouble controlling their own societies and local players sought regional allies against their domestic opponents. Non-state actors played major roles. The contending camps themselves were not always united, with tactical alliances crossing what appeared to be the lines of conflict. Israel was a focus, but not much of a player. The great powers were important participants, but not the drivers of events. The new Middle East cold war shares every one of these characteristics.<sup>3</sup> The current confrontation has even come to play a major role in the struggle for power in Syria, which has drawn in all the regional players, much as was the case in the early years of the Arab cold war.<sup>4</sup>

This new Middle East cold war has an important sectarian element, but it cannot be accurately understood simply as a “Sunni versus Shia” fight. It is a balance of power game, but not one played by impermeable state entities with matching military power and occasionally clashing on the battlefield. It can only be understood by appreciating the links between domestic conflicts, transnational affinities, and regional state ambitions.<sup>5</sup> Domestic conflicts for power lead local actors to seek out regional allies who can supply them with money, guns, ideological cover, and diplomatic support. They look for regional allies who share, in some way, their own political and ideological positions, with whom they feel some kinship on ideological or identity grounds. The regional powers need these ideological or identity links to consolidate their relations with their local clients. Providing clients with material support is important, but it is not enough to sustain influence. States that have the military and material potential to reach for regional domination but lack these ideological and identity links across borders, like Israel, are severely

hampered in their ability to have an impact on the new Middle East cold war.

While Nasir’s 1967 defeat marked the end of his overwhelming stature in the Arab world, the real end of the Arab cold war came with the solidifying of Arab state entities. Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states built governing regimes that were oppressive and at times brutal, but were ultimately effective at controlling their societies. The decline of the transnational ideological power of Arab nationalism coincided with the politics of many Arab states becoming increasingly difficult to penetrate. Important outliers like Lebanon and Yemen remained weak and open to outside interference in this period of Arab state consolidation in the 1970s and 1980s, but they were bucking a regional trend. Many Arab states are now experiencing the weakening, if not the collapse, of those state-building projects. It is that weakening of the state, more than sectarianism or the rise of Islamist ideologies, that has created the battlefields of the new Middle East cold war. Given how difficult it will be to reconstruct stable political orders in these states, the likelihood is great that the new Middle East cold war will be as protracted as the Arab cold war was.

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<sup>3</sup> For a similar argument, see Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), Chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-war Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Bassel Salloukh reaches a similar conclusion in “The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East,” *The International Spectator* 48, no. 2 (June 2013): 32-46.



## A SECTARIAN CIVIL WAR?

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Understanding the dynamics of the new Middle East cold war requires an examination of some of the alternative frameworks that have been put forward to explain the current phase of regional politics. The most common of those frameworks is sectarian—that the struggle for power in the Middle East today is basically a Sunni versus Shia contest. While nuanced observers have stressed that other factors are involved, the shorthand of “Sunni versus Shia” has come to dominate media and even policy analysis.<sup>6</sup> Watching the killing in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, one can easily understand why. Sectarianism is a major element of the domestic conflicts in all of these places as well as in Yemen and Bahrain. Regional media outlets, from Hizballah’s al-Manar television station to Sunni jihadi websites to Saudi-owned newspapers and television stations, play up the sectarian nature of these struggles. There is no denying its important role in understanding the current regional conflicts.

An exclusive focus on sectarianism as the cause of regional upheaval, however, can distort analytical focus. An unstated assumption in the sectarianism argument is that these conflicts are primordial and thus beyond political solutions, but they are not. Sunni and Shia Muslims have lived in harmony for many more years of Islamic history than they have fought. Conflict axes in the recent past of the Middle East did

not develop along Sunni-Shia lines. The Arab cold war was not sectarian, but ideological. The Lebanese civil war was a sectarian fight, but Christian versus Muslim, with Sunni and Shia Lebanese largely on the same side. When Iraq fought Iran in the 1980s, Arab supporters of Iraq played up the Arab versus Persian nationalist fight, while Arab sympathizers with Iran (the Syrian regime most notably) emphasized the Islamic Republic’s commitment to the Arab nationalist cause against Israel. The particularities of current politics, not “centuries-long hatreds,” have sparked this latest round of Sunni-Shia tensions, and these particularities are subject to change.

The sectarian lens also over-simplifies the dynamics of regional conflicts. Kurds are an important part of both the Syrian and Iraqi stories, and their identity is ethno-nationalist, not sectarian. Christians in Lebanon are split, some supporting the Sunni-led March 14 alliance and others with Hizballah in the March 8 coalition. The Sunni-Shia shorthand has made the Alawis, a heretical offshoot of Shi’ite Islam in the eyes of most Shi’ite religious scholars, into “Shia” simply to fit into the Sunni versus Shia schema.<sup>7</sup> What began as a political alliance between a secular Ba’athist regime in Syria and a revolutionary Islamic regime in Iran, cemented by common enemies in Israel and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, has been incorrectly made over

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Geneive Abdo, “The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Sunni-Shi’a Divide,” Analysis Paper no. 29, Saban Center at the Brookings Institution, April 2013, <<http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/04/sunni-shia-divide-abdo>>. Abdo’s report is careful and nuanced, but does privilege sectarianism as the most important lens for understanding current regional conflicts. A more representative example of the media focus is Max Fisher, “Why Sunnis and Shiites are Fighting, Explained in Two Minutes,” *Washington Post*, 22 January 2014, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/01/22/why-sunnis-and-shias-are-fighting-explained-in-two-minutes/>>.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Kramer, “Syria’s Alawis and Shi’ism,” in *Shi’ism, Resistance and Revolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 237-254.

into a sectarian alliance.<sup>8</sup> Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has almost as many problems dealing with the Shia allies in his coalition as he does with Sunni and Kurdish factions in the Iraqi parliament.<sup>9</sup> “Sunni versus Shia” makes for a simple headline, but does not do justice to the complexities of the new Middle East cold war.

Perhaps the most dangerous oversimplification to come from an un-nuanced acceptance of the “Sunni versus Shia” frame is to misunderstand the motivations of the two major state actors in the regional contest for influence. It is very easy to paint Saudi Arabia and Iran as sectarian actors, acting regionally with sectarian motives.

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Both are obviously sectarian regimes at home, propounding very specific Sunni-Wahhabi (in the Saudi case) and Shia (in the Iranian case) legitimacy arguments to bolster their rule. It is therefore a simple analytical step to assume that sectarianism drives their foreign policies, but that step is incorrect. Riyadh and Tehran are playing a balance of power game. They are using sectarianism in that game, yet their motivations are not centuries-long religious disputes but a simple contest for regional influence. Neither side publicly asserts that they are engaged in a sectarian fight—in fact, each blames the other for introducing sectarian divisiveness into regional politics. That neither will admit to sectarian motives, even while using sectarianism to build patron-client relations, gives some indication of what they think regional audiences do and do not want to hear.

Both Riyadh and Tehran have also crossed the sectarian fault line in seeking regional allies. This is more important for the Iranians, as a purely sectarian frame locks them into a minority position in most countries. Among Palestinian organizations, they have developed close relationships with Hamas and Islamic Jihad (though ties with the former have been strained over the Syrian civil war) and positioned themselves to lead the “axis of resistance” against Israel.<sup>10</sup> They have a good working relationship with some of the Kurdish organizations in Iraq’s Kurdish Regional Government, particularly the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Since Iran’s revolution, Tehran has publicly downplayed the particular Shi’ite nature of its version of Islamist revolutionary politics, emphasizing the ecumenical Muslim nature of its model, while still having its greatest success in developing allies and clients among Arab Shia.

The Saudis, while exploiting sectarianism in Syria where there is a Sunni majority, have also not limited their alliances simply to fellow Sunnis, nor adopted every Sunni group as an ally. Riyadh strongly backed the Iraqiya party led by Iyad Allawi in the Iraqi elections of 2005 and 2010.<sup>11</sup> Allawi is a thoroughly secular politician, but a Shi’ite by birth, and his coalition included an ethnic and sectarian cross-section of Iraq. While it might have been weighted toward the Sunni Arab minority, it was not a Sunni sectarian party. Such parties existed in Iraq, and there is no evidence that they received similar support from Saudi Arabia. In Syria, the Saudis originally patronized the least sectarian of the rebel groups, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and other groups that kept their distance from the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>12</sup> After

<sup>8</sup> On the historical background of the Syrian-Iranian alliance, see Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated System* (London: Routledge, 1997); Hussein Agha and Ahmad Khalidi, *Syria and Iran: Rivalry and Cooperation* (London: Pinter Publishers for the Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Harith Hasan, “New Shia Politics and the Maliki-Sadr Competition in Iraq,” MENASource, Atlantic Council, 17 November 2013, <<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/new-shia-politics-and-the-maliki-sadr-competition-in-iraq>>.

<sup>10</sup> Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 61–69, 171–73.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Gordon, “Meddling Neighbors Undercut Iraqi Stability,” *The New York Times*, 5 December 2010; Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012), 192.

deciding that the FSA was not producing the desired results, the Saudis shifted some of their backing to more overtly sectarian Salafi fighting groups, supporting the formation of the Islamic Front in 2013, but still refusing to back Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the Sunni fighting groups publicly linked to al-Qaeda.<sup>13</sup> Sectarianism was never the sole basis upon which Saudi Arabia approached the Syrian civil war. Finally, a purely sectarian frame cannot explain Saudi hostility toward the Muslim Brotherhood, an important element of post-Arab Spring regional politics. If sectarianism dominates Saudi policy-making, the Brotherhood should be seen by Riyadh as an ally, but this is hardly the case in Egypt, Iraq, or Syria.

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Chulov, Ewen MacAskill and John Densky, "Saudi Arabia plans to fund Syria rebel army," *The Guardian*, 22 June 2012, <[www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/22/saudi-arabia-syria-rebel-army](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/22/saudi-arabia-syria-rebel-army)>; Roula Khalaf, "Arms Deliveries to Syrian Rebels Delayed," *Financial Times*, 11 July 2012, <<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/36d84430-cb5f-11e1-b896-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2xLJMaFNy>>; Robert F. Worth, "Citing U.S. Fears, Arab Allies Limit Syrian Rebel Aid," *The New York Times*, 6 October 2012; Ruth Sherlock, Magdy Samaan and Suha Maayeh, "Saudi Arabia backs push to carve out liberated southern Syria," *The Telegraph*, 5 April 2013, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9975211/Saudi-Arabia-backs-push-to-carve-out-liberated-southern-Syria.html>>; Rania Abouzeid, "The Shadow War Behind Syria's Rebellion: Foreign Backers Jockey for Influence in Turkey," *Time*, 24 May 2013, <<http://world.time.com/2013/05/24/the-shadow-war-behind-syrias-rebellion-foreign-backers-jockey-for-influence-in-turkey/>>; Adam Entous, Nour Malas and Margaret Coker, "A Veteran Saudi Power Player Works to Build Support to Topple Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 August 2013, <<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323423804579024452583045962>>.

<sup>13</sup> Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Saudi Arabia Boosts Salafist Rivals to al-Qaeda in Syria," Reuters, 1 October 2013, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/01/us-syria-crisis-jihadists-insight-idUSBRE9900RO20131001>>; Yezid Sayigh, "Unifying Syria's Rebels: Saudi Arabia Joins the Fray," Carnegie Middle East Center, 28 October 2013, <<http://carnegie-mec.org/2013/10/28/unifying-syria-s-rebels-saudi-arabia-joins-fray/grh>>; Ben Gilbert, "Saudi Arabia Walks a Fine Line in Backing Syrian Rebellion," *Al Jazeera America*, 20 January 2014, <<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/1/20/saudi-arabia-walksafinelinkinbackingsyriarebellion.html>>.

## THE DOMESTIC BASES OF THE NEW MIDDLE EAST COLD WAR

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Rather than seeing the new Middle East cold war as a top-down phenomenon driven by two states animated by sectarian rivalry, it is more accurate to view it as a bottom-up dynamic. The weakness or breakdown of state authority creates domestic political vacuums into which outsiders are drawn. These outsiders generally do not have to force themselves into these domestic political arenas. They are invited in by local political factions vying for power against their local rivals. The object of the cold war rivalry for Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other regional powers is not to defeat their regional rivals militarily on the battlefield. It is to promote the fortunes of their own clients in these weak state domestic struggles and thus build up regional influence.

It is important to distinguish between state weakness in the domestic political arena and weakness in international power rankings. A domestically weak state is one where the central government exercises little effective control over its society. It cannot enforce its writ in substantial parts of its territory. Its courts cannot enforce decisions, it cannot provide basic services to its citizens, and it does not control its borders. Sub-national groups have the military power to challenge the weak state's control of territory, so the domestically weak state does not even pass the basic Weberian test of statehood—a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within its borders. In domestically weak states, citizens frequently have political

loyalties that supersede their loyalty to the state itself, be they regional, sectarian, sub-national, or transnational.<sup>14</sup> Kuwait is a weak state in terms of international power; it cannot defend itself militarily against any of its neighbors. Yet it is a fairly strong state in terms of its own state-society relations. The Kuwaiti government effectively controls its territory and polices its borders. Its citizens are generally loyal to the Kuwaiti state; their identity as Kuwaitis is not trumped by tribal, sectarian, or Arab nationalist affiliations. Those other identities are important in understanding how Kuwaitis behave politically, but they do not supersede Kuwaiti identity as the primary political loyalty of the citizens. Iraq ranks much higher than Kuwait in international power rankings due to the size of its population, economy, and military, but it is now a weak state in terms of state-society relations.

The seriousness of a regional cold war is determined by the number of such domestically weak states that exist at a given time. During the Arab cold war of the 1950s and 1960s, very few of the Arab states could be considered strong in terms of state-society relations. Loyalty to the state was challenged by sub-national and supra-national identities, most notably by Arab nationalism. The states themselves were institutionally weak, without the large and stultifying bureaucratic apparatuses they eventually built to control, monitor, and direct their societies and economies. Nasir was able to mobilize

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<sup>14</sup> There is extensive literature on the relative strength and weakness of states in terms of their ability to govern their societies and the related topic of state-building. See Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Mohammed Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament: State-Making, Regional Conflict and the International System* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995); Susan E. Rice and Stewart Patrick, "Index of State Weakness in the Developing World," The Brookings Institution, 2008, <[http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/research/files/reports/2008/2/weak%20states%20index/02\\_weak\\_states\\_index.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/research/files/reports/2008/2/weak%20states%20index/02_weak_states_index.pdf)>.

support in many of these states, shake their governments, and even help to bring down regimes in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

Conversely, in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, when the salience of revolutionary political Islam was at its height and the new Islamic Republic regime was actively encouraging the “export” of the revolution, not a single Arab government fell, though many faced serious crises and upheaval. This was not because the message of Islamist revolution did not resonate in the region. The success of Islamist political groups of various stripes since that time belies that contention. Rather, the ability of the Arab regimes to blunt the ripple effects of Iran’s Islamic revolution stemmed from the fact that they had built themselves into stronger institutional entities that were better able to coopt, control, and repress their populations. Oil wealth helped, but even non-oil states like Syria and Jordan had been able to strengthen state control over society. This process was not peaceful or entirely positive for the citizens—state-building never is. It involved civil conflict and even civil war in some places, the growth of the secret police and a concomitant loss of political freedom, and the corruption and economic stagnation that comes from an overweening state. Nonetheless, it enabled the Arab regimes to survive the shock of the Iranian revolution.

Iran’s biggest initial success in “exporting” its revolution occurred in Lebanon with the creation of Hizballah in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion of 1982. Lebanon was an exception to the process of state-building that absorbed its Arab neighbors in the 1970s and 1980s, and its political history has been marked by foreign intervention. Israel and Syria both intervened militarily, especially during Lebanon’s 1975-1990 civil war, occupying substantial swathes of Lebanese territory for some time. Other powers intervened indirectly, supporting

various Lebanese factions. Iran was most successful on this score, helping to build its ally Hizballah into the most important actor in the country, but Saudi Arabia and even Saddam Hussein’s Iraq patronized their own clients in Lebanese politics. Every Lebanese faction looks to foreign powers for financial, military, and diplomatic support. Given the overtly sectarian basis of the Lebanese political system, those factions were inevitably sectarian. Yemen is another example of an Arab state that never developed a strong central authority. After the unity between North and South Yemen in 1990, the patrimonial and ad hoc rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh in the north was extended into the south, with the centrifugal pressures that resulted still affecting Yemeni politics today. In this case, it is Saudi Arabia that has most effectively developed relations with the tribal sheikhs, Islamist leaders, regional factions, and ambitious politicians.<sup>15</sup>

***A domestically weak state is one where the central government excercises little effective control over its society.***

As long as these areas of state weakness remained few and somewhat marginal to the strategic centers of regional politics, state-to-state relations dominated the international politics of the Middle East. From the 1970s through the early 2000s, inter-state war and peace drove regional dynamics. The October 1973 war led to Egyptian-Israeli peace, followed by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which pushed a major non-state Arab actor, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), all the way to Tunis. Iran and Iraq fought their eight-year war, followed by Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War of 1990-91 that restored Kuwaiti sovereignty. That war was followed by a new round of Arab-Israeli negotiations, leading to Jordanian-Israeli peace in 1994 and the most serious Syrian-Israeli and PLO-Israeli negotiations in

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of Yemen’s turbulent post-unity politics, see Stephen W. Day, *Regionalism and Rebellion in Yemen: A Troubled National Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

history in the late 1990s. An important (at least in retrospect) Arab non-state actor, al-Qaeda, had to find a base far from the Arab world, in Afghanistan, from which to plan the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 shifted this pattern, starting the reversal of Arab state strengthening that had begun in the 1970s. The capacity of the Iraqi state had eroded severely after the Gulf War, but the American invasion was the coup de grace. Washington chose to tear down the authoritarian state's three major pillars—banning the ruling Ba'ath party, dissolving the military, and purging the bureaucracy of experienced cadres who were members of the party—in a misbegotten effort to build the state anew.<sup>16</sup> What followed was an opening of the Iraqi political system to outside

***“The breaking of the Iraqi state enormously increased the salience of sectarianism in regional politics.”***

political influence, most notably from Iran. Iraq, which for decades had been a player in regional politics, joined Lebanon and Yemen as a battleground in Arab politics. This was the real beginning of the new Middle East cold war.

The breaking of the Iraqi state enormously increased the salience of sectarianism in regional politics, from the bottom-up. Sectarian and ethnic identities had been important in Iraqi politics since the days of the Hashemite monarchy, but when the state was strong, their importance was mitigated by other identities and loyalties, including to the state itself, and kept in check by state institutions. The weakening of the Iraqi state under sanctions in the 1990s led Hussein to increase his reliance on sectarian Sunni and tribal loyalty to buttress his failing rule.<sup>17</sup> With the collapse of the state in

2003, sectarian and ethnic Kurdish identities became primary in the fight for power. Shia parties looked to Iran for support; Sunnis similarly looked to Saudi Arabia.<sup>18</sup> The sectarian character of the new Middle East cold war was set.

When Syria eventually descended into civil conflict during the Arab uprisings of 2011, the sectarian element of the new Middle East cold war intensified. The protests that began the Syrian crisis were peaceful and broadly based, calling for political reform. The violent over-reaction of the Bashar al-Assad regime to these protests drove the country into civil war. As that conflict intensified and Syrian state authority collapsed in various parts of the country, the regime came to rely more and more on its bedrock constituency, the Alawi minority, and other religious minorities fearful of change. In a mirror image, the opposition increasingly became characterized by Sunni sectarian appeals, and armed Sunni Islamist groups played an increasing role in the conflict.<sup>19</sup>

An arc of state weakness and state failure, running from Lebanon through Syria to Iraq, explains the salience of sectarianism in the new Middle East cold war.<sup>20</sup> The retreat of the state, accompanied particularly in Syria by the violence exercised by those who controlled the state, drove people in these countries to look to sectarian identities and groups for the protection and material sustenance that the state either could or would no longer provide. These groups looked to external allies for support in their domestic political and military conflicts. As sectarianism increasingly defined their struggles, it was natural that they look to co-religionists—Iran for Shia and Saudi Arabia for Sunnis—for that support. The retreat of the state made it possible for Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other regional states to play an increasing

<sup>16</sup> F. Gregory Gause, III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 155-168.

<sup>17</sup> Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 2nd ed., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), Chapter 10.

<sup>18</sup> Dodge, *Iraq: War to Authoritarianism*, Chapters 1 and 6.

<sup>19</sup> Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Byman, "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 56, no. 1 (February/March 2014): 79-100.

role in the civil conflicts of Lebanon (for some time), Iraq (since 2003), and Syria (since 2011). This is the core, bottom-up dynamic driving the new Middle East cold war. Saudi Arabia and Iran did not create the state weakness and sectarian identities in these countries, but they are certainly taking advantage, advancing their own interests in a classic balance of power game.

## RIVALRY FOR POWER

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The new Middle East cold war predates the Arab Spring by at least half a decade, but increased Iranian influence in the Arab world dates back even longer. The Iranian revolutionary regime was keen to spread its revolutionary model in the Arab world, but was stymied by the relatively strong states. The establishment of Hizballah, which remains its strongest non-state ally, was described above. In a very different manner, Tehran established a strong state-to-state alliance with Ba'athist Syria. This alliance was based not on common values—the secular, Arab nationalist regime of Hafez al-Assad could not have been to the liking of Ayatollah Khomeini—but on common enemies, Israel and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In general, however, Khomeini's dream of spreading the Islamic revolution throughout the Muslim world, beginning in the Middle East, failed.<sup>21</sup>

Iranian diplomacy lost much of its revolutionary élan after the death of Khomeini. Tehran continued to excoriate the United States and Israel on ideological grounds, but from the late 1980s through the early 2000s it engaged in more normal state-to-state diplomacy. Elements of the regime never abandoned the rhetoric of, nor the desire for, “export of the revolution,” but Iran sought improved relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (a process accelerated on both sides by Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990), Turkey, and Egypt. In part, this was because the opportunities for ideological advances were limited. Saddam still held tightly to the rump

of Iraq he controlled. The Taliban regime to the east of Iran was extremely hostile. The Gulf states with significant Shi'ite communities were able to fend off efforts at political penetration through oil-driven state building—providing benefits for Shi'ite citizens and developing security services that effectively monitored and controlled the populations. Iran's regional moderation was at least in part the result of a lack of opportunities to spread its influence.<sup>22</sup>

New opportunities presented themselves in the 2000s. The American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq opened up the political arena in two of Iran's neighbors, one of which had a majority Shi'ite population. United States policy created two new political vacuums into which Iranian influence could flow. The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran in 2005 brought to power that ever-present faction that is more committed to the revolutionary rhetoric of Ayatollah Khomeini and to spreading Iranian influence to the domestic politics of other states. These renewed ambitions and new opportunities in Iraq propelled Iran into a new position of power in the eastern Arab world. By the mid-2000s, Iran was a leading, if not the leading, foreign influence in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.<sup>23</sup>

As the consequences of the American invasion of Iraq became apparent, particularly the increase in Iranian influence in Iraq, Saudi Arabia gradually concluded that it would have to take the lead in balancing, if not rolling back, Iranian power in the eastern Arab world.

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<sup>21</sup> Gause, *International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, Chapters 3-5; Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, Chapters 5, 6, 9, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



It is uncharacteristic of Riyadh to take the lead in regional foreign affairs, particularly in a confrontational way. Weak militarily, the Saudis have preferred to work behind the scenes, avoiding direct challenges that might lead to conflict. State-to-state relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran during the presidencies of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Muhammad Khatami were hardly warm, but neither were they openly hostile. Even after the election of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, who moved away from the more conciliatory rhetoric of his immediate predecessors, the Saudis made a few efforts to find some kind of regional modus vivendi with Tehran. The two states even worked together to try to resolve tensions among their clients in Lebanon in early 2007.<sup>24</sup> As late as March 2007 the Saudis hosted Ahmadinejad in Riyadh. Clearly, however, somewhere in the mid-to-late 2000s, Riyadh decided that no other Arab state was willing or able to act as a counterweight to growing Iranian influence in the eastern Arab world and that it would have to do the job itself.

The problem for the Saudis was that the Iranians got the better of them at almost every turn. In Lebanon, it looked like Riyadh dealt Tehran a setback in 2005 with the withdrawal of Syria's forces and the victory of the March 14 coalition in the subsequent parliamentary elections. March 14 was led by Saad al-Hariri, son of the assassinated former prime minister and close Saudi ally Rafiq al-Hariri. Before long, however, Hizballah proved that it was still the real power in Lebanese politics. It demonstrated its utter disregard for the Lebanese government in its independent conduct of foreign and military policy during its brief war with Israel in 2006. In 2008, during a confrontation with the government over control of domestic security policy, Hizballah fighters took over downtown Beirut. Despite March 14's second victory at

the polls in the 2009 parliamentary elections, Saudi Arabia's Lebanese allies were unable to subdue Hizballah. By the beginning of 2011, March 14 had lost its parliamentary majority as some of its elements joined with Hizballah and its allies to unseat Saad al-Hariri from the premiership.<sup>25</sup>

The Saudis also failed to constrain Iranian influence in Iraq. As Iran consolidated its influence with newly empowered Shi'ite groups, Saudi Arabia was unable to patronize its natural allies in Iraq's Sunni Arab community. Members of this community were engaged in an insurgency against the United States, whose relations with Saudi Arabia were fragile in the post-9/11 period, and part of that insurgency was identified with the same strain of Salafi jihadism that was trying to destabilize the Saudi regime. (Riyadh finds itself in the same situation regarding the gains made by ISIS in the summer of 2014.) When the *al-Sahwa* (Awakening) movement emerged in 2006, Saudi Arabia found an Iraqi ally with which it could do business—Sunni, hostile to Iranian influence in Iraq, but cooperating with the United States—Riyadh backed *al-Sahwa*. While the movement was able to push back (at least temporarily) against al-Qaeda influence in Iraq's Sunni Arab community, it could do little to affect politics at its center. To challenge the demographic weight of Iraq's Shi'ite majority at the ballot box, Riyadh backed the Iraqiya party led by Iyad Allawi, who had served as prime minister of the transitional Iraqi government of 2004-05. Allawi is Shi'ite, but constructed his party as a cross-sectarian and multi-ethnic coalition based on Iraqi nationalism. While the party did not do well in the 2005 elections, discontent with Prime Minister Nuri

***“It is uncharacteristic of Riyadh to take the lead in regional foreign affairs, particularly in a confrontational way.”***

<sup>24</sup> Michael Slackman, “U.S. Ally and Foe are Trying to Avert War in Lebanon,” *The New York Times*, 30 January 2007, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/30/world/middleeast/30lebanon.html?pagewanted=print>>

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Shadid, “Ousted Lebanese Leader Swallows Rivals’ Bitter Pill,” *The New York Times*, 25 January 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/26/world/middleeast/26lebanon.html>>.

al-Maliki gave Allawi an opening in the 2010 parliamentary elections. The Saudis supported him financially and through Saudi-owned Arab media outlets.<sup>26</sup> The Iraqiya party succeeded in getting a plurality of the seats, besting Maliki's State of Law coalition by two seats, but Maliki was able, with Iranian support, to hold together the sectarian Shia parties and retain the premiership.<sup>27</sup> The Saudis were reduced to purely symbolic, and arguably counterproductive, gestures like refusing to receive Maliki in Riyadh for official visits and refusing to send an ambassador to Baghdad.

While Palestine is not riven by sectarian differences, it is another example of a weak state (or, more accurately, proto-state) in which outsiders find it easy to meddle. With the victory of Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, the Palestinian Authority has seen power divided between Fatah, represented by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and Hamas. Both looked to outsiders for support, with Hamas seeing in Iran an ideological—though not sectarian—ally. In an effort to reunite Palestinian ranks and close off an access point for Iran in the Arab world, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia brought Hamas and Fatah leaders together in Mecca in February 2007. The power-sharing agreement he brokered fell apart almost immediately. In the subsequent fighting in June 2007, Hamas secured control over Gaza while Fatah maintained its sway in the West Bank.<sup>28</sup> With the two Palestinian factions in open confrontation, Hamas' relationship with Iran grew stronger, though the upsurge in regional sectarianism since the Syrian civil war began has strained that tie. Saudi Arabia patronized the Palestinian

Authority in the West Bank to keep its hand in the game of Palestinian politics, but failed to close off Iranian access to this core Arab and Muslim symbolic issue.

These failures of Saudi foreign policy can help explain the disproportionate Saudi reaction, and the large amount of publicity they gave, to the rise of the Houthi movement in northern Yemen. The Houthis are a Zaidi Shi'ite movement that developed in the early 2000s to assert Zaidi rights amidst what they saw as the increased role of Salafi Sunnis in Yemen. The Houthis adopted much of the rhetoric of the Iranian regime, including bombastic anti-American and anti-Israeli language, though the extent of Iranian support for the movement seems to have been very limited.<sup>29</sup> In November 2009, Riyadh launched a major military operation along the Saudi-Yemeni border to punish the Houthis for what the Saudis claimed were encroachments into Saudi territory. The campaign received extensive coverage in the Saudi media, far beyond its accomplishments. The Saudi claim to "victory" in Yemen over an Iranian ally in 2009 can be seen as an effort to convince regional audiences that Riyadh could win one against Tehran in the regional contest for influence.<sup>30</sup>

When the Arab Spring began, Iran had been on a winning streak in the Middle East cold war and was looking for more victories. The swift fall of (somewhat) secularist, American-allied regimes in Tunisia and Egypt contributed to a triumphalist attitude in Tehran. The government portrayed these events as part of an Islamic, not an Arab, movement that began with Iran's own revolution in 1979. In early

<sup>26</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "Meddling Neighbors Undercut Iraqi Stability," *The New York Times*, 5 December 2010, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/06/world/middleeast/06wikileaks-iraq.html>>.

<sup>27</sup> Ned Parker, "Dozens of Iraqis pardoned at Sadr movement's behest," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 July 2011, <[www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-iraq-pardons-20110727,0,3363151.story](http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-iraq-pardons-20110727,0,3363151.story)>; Dodge, *Iraq: War to Authoritarianism*, 186-88.

<sup>28</sup> International Crisis Group, "After Gaza," Middle East Report no. 68, 2 August 2007, <[http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/68\\_after\\_gaza.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/68_after_gaza.pdf)>.

<sup>29</sup> International Crisis Group, "Yemen: Defusing the Saada Timebomb," Middle East Report no. 86, 27 May 2009, 2-4, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/yemen/086-yemen-defusing-the-saada-time-bomb.aspx>>.

<sup>30</sup> Daud al-Shiryan, "Ad'af al-'iman - al-Yemen fi Muwajihat Iran" [The least one could do - Yemen in confrontation with Iran], Mareb Press, 19 August 2009, <<http://marebpress.net/articles.php?lng=arabic&cid=5731>>; Thom Shanker and Robert F. Worth, "Yemen Seizes Sailboat Filled with Weapons, and U.S. Points to Iran," *The New York Times*, 28 January 2013, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/29/world/middleeast/29military.html>>.

February 2012, it invited numerous Arab delegations (but none from Syria) to a conference to celebrate what it called the “Islamist Awakening.”<sup>31</sup> The Saudis, on the other hand, were on the defensive. The fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt was a serious blow to Saudi regional policy. Cairo had been Riyadh’s most important regional partner—a fellow American ally that shared Saudi worries about the spread of Iranian influence. The Saudis bolstered fellow monarchs with cash and, in the case of Bahrain, troops to support the suppression of the popular mobilization for political reform. They supported the NATO military intervention against Qaddafi, but that was more personal payback for decades of insults from the mercurial Libyan leader and a Libyan-financed effort to assassinate King Abdallah than regional strategy. They were able to reassert their central role in Yemeni politics, brokering the resignation of Ali Abdullah Saleh from the presidency as part of a GCC plan supported by the United States and the EU.<sup>32</sup> Bahrain and Yemen were merely holding actions, though, and the fall of Qaddafi did not really shift the regional power game. None of these marginal successes could make up for the loss of Egypt in Saudi regional strategy. In general, the Arab Spring seemed to the Saudis to be yet another setback in their efforts to confront Iranian influence in the eastern Arab world.

This is why Syria became so central to Saudi Arabia. The Syrian revolt against Bashar al-Assad was the one opportunity presented by the upheavals of the Arab Spring for Riyadh to roll back Iranian influence. The Saudis were slow to react to events in Syria, their natural aversion to political mobilization from below inducing caution. Moreover, Turkey’s and

Qatar’s quick embrace of the Syrian opposition left the Saudis behind the curve and reluctant to play second fiddle, especially to their ambitious Gulf neighbor (see below). By the start of 2012, though, Riyadh was “all in” for the Syrian rebellion. It initially supported the more secular forces of the FSA, while Turkey and Qatar backed Islamist groups in the north of the country. As the inability of the FSA to make much military progress became apparent and Turkey and Qatar backed away from their initial support for the opposition, the Saudis refocused support toward Islamist, and particularly Salafi, opposition groups, other than ISIS and al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>33</sup>

As of mid-2014, what has become an integrated Syria-Iraq crisis remains the major battleground of the new Middle East cold war. Iranian influence in Lebanon seems secure, and Tehran seems to hold the upper hand in both Syria and Iraq. Bashar al-Assad looks more secure than he was just a year ago. The ISIS-led assault in Iraq has little prospect of success outside of Sunni areas and gains by ISIS—now known as the Islamic State—are hardly victories for Saudi Arabia. The Saudis have successfully bolstered their fellow Arab monarchs and ratified their leading position in Yemen. How the Syrian-Iraqi crisis ends will largely determine Middle Eastern perceptions of who “won” this round of the contest for regional influence.

<sup>31</sup> Robert F. Worth, “Effort to Rebrand Arab Spring Backfires in Iran,” *The New York Times*, 2 February 2012, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/03/world/middleeast/effort-to-rebrand-arab-spring-backfires-in-iran.html>>.

<sup>32</sup> International Crisis Group, “Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition,” Middle East Report no. 125, 3 July 2012, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Yemen/125-yemen-enduring-conflicts-threatened-transition.pdf>>, 1-3.

<sup>33</sup> Chulov, MacAskill, and Densky, “Saudi Arabia plans”; Khalaf, “Arms Deliveries Delayed”; Worth, “Arab Allies Limit Aid”; Sherlock, Samaan and Maayeh, “Saudi Arabia backs push”; Abouzeid, “Shadow War”; Entous, Malas and Coker, “Veteran Saudi Power Player”; Oweis, “Saudi Arabia Boosts Salafist”; Sayigh, “Unifying Syria’s Rebels”; Gilbert, “Saudi Arabia Walks a Fine Line.”

# THE INTRA-SUNNI COLD WAR:

## SAUDI ARABIA, THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND SALAFI JIHADISTS

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Axes of conflict in cold wars are never simply bilateral. There are always tangents of tension among what one would think of as “natural” allies. China broke from the Soviet camp during the historic Cold War over geopolitical and ideological differences. During the Arab cold war of the 1950s and 1960s, the “progressive” Iraqi regime of Abd al-Karim Qasim refused to follow Abd al-Nasir’s lead. The Syrian Ba’ath helped to break up the United Arab Republic in 1961. The same is true of the new Middle East cold war. One might assume that Sunni Islamists of various stripes would make common cause in the regional upheavals of the last few years, but the opposite has been the case. The Saudis, the Muslim Brotherhood and its regional allies like the Justice and Development party (AKP) government in Turkey, the Salafi jihadists of al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and its ideological counterparts like the Islamic State, and other Sunni groups are locked in a conflict over what the proper political role of Islam should be in the Sunni world.

From a purely sectarian frame, the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia should have been close allies against Shi’ite Iran. In fact, the Saudis were the biggest cheerleaders (and funders) of the military coup that ousted the elected Brotherhood president of Egypt. While Saudi Arabia and Turkey both backed the Syrian revolt, there is no evidence that they coordinated their support. The two major

Sunni powers in the Middle East cold war are hardly allies. While Saudi Arabia increasingly supported Salafi groups in Syria as the civil war there dragged on, it still sought to differentiate the “good” Salafi groups from those aligned with al-Qaeda, which sees the Saudi regime as one of its major enemies—a difficult task at best.<sup>34</sup> While increasing its support for the Syrian rebellion, in early 2014 Riyadh declared it illegal for Saudis to join the fighting there or in other foreign countries, reacting to the number of Saudis who were joining al-Qaeda-linked groups in the Syrian war.<sup>35</sup> In March 2014, Saudi Arabia officially designated the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and ISIS as terrorist organizations.<sup>36</sup> In this supposedly sectarian regional conflict, the Sunnis seem to distrust each other as much as they distrust the Shia.

The Arab upheavals of 2011 were fundamentally about the basis of legitimate rule in the Arab world. In some cases, like Syria and Bahrain, that original issue was transformed by regime strategies and violence into a sectarian clash. Elsewhere in the Arab world, however, where the social fabric was not as riven by competing identities and the state did not completely collapse, that core constitutional question remained at the heart of political contests. Egypt is the perfect example. The results of the parliamentary election of 2011, where the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice

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<sup>34</sup> “The commander of an Islamist rebel unit . . . told Reuters that Saudi figures had been in touch with various Salafist groups in recent weeks, offering support in return for a common front to keep al Qaeda allies from expanding their presence around the capital.” Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Saudi Arabia Boosts Salafist.”

<sup>35</sup> Angus McDowell and Yara Bayoumy, “Saudi Arabia to jail citizens who fight abroad,” Reuters, 3 February 2014, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/03/us-saudi-law-idUSBREA1213O20140203>>.

<sup>36</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, “Saudis Put Terrorist Label on Muslim Brotherhood,” *New York Times*, 7 March 2014, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/08/world/middleeast/saudis-put-terrorist-label-on-muslim-brotherhood.html>>.

Party and the Salafi Nour Party took nearly 70% of the seats between them, and the presidential election of 2012, where Brotherhood candidate Muhammad Morsi won a very close race against Mubarak's last prime minister, seemed to chart a path of democratic Islamist government. The Brotherhood equivalent in Tunisia, Ennahda, did not win such a crushing victory in the 2011 constituent assembly elections, but emerged with a clear plurality of the votes.

This combination of democracy and Islamist politics was unsettling to the Saudi leadership. The upheaval in Egypt had not only removed Saudi Arabia's primary Arab ally, it also brought to power a regime that could credibly contest Saudi Arabia's role as leader of the Sunni Muslim world, and even present an alternative form of Sunni Islamist politics to the Saudi monarchical model. Anti-Brotherhood sentiments are not limited to the Saudi government. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been particularly harsh on the Brotherhood, imprisoning its members and sympathizers and closing down related institutions.<sup>37</sup> To add insult to injury for the Saudis, their obstreperous Gulf neighbor, Qatar, was very publicly supporting the Brotherhood government in Egypt and was backing the Brotherhood's cause more generally throughout the region.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps even more challenging for the Saudis in the long run, the swiftness with which Egypt's Salafis entered the electoral fray showed that even within their own ideological camp, anti-democratic arguments were subject to challenge.

On a purely foreign policy basis, the Saudis should have found some common ground

with Muhammad Morsi. While Morsi visited Tehran during his presidency, a move that raised suspicions in Riyadh, he used the occasion to criticize Iranian policy on Syria. He then, in effect, called for a jihad against the Assad government.<sup>39</sup> Yet the Saudis never trusted the Brotherhood in power, and enthusiastically backed General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's military coup in July 2013. Riyadh, along with its GCC allies the UAE and Kuwait, has bestowed billions of dollars in aid to the government installed after the coup and strenuously defended it against criticism from the United States and Europe.<sup>40</sup>

***“On a purely foreign policy basis, the Saudis should have sound some common ground with Muhammad Morsi.”***

The inability of Turkey and Saudi Arabia to form a powerful axis in opposition to Assad in Syria and Iranian influence in the region more generally can also be attributed, in part, to an intra-Sunni Islamist dispute over political order. AKP, which has ruled Turkey since 2002, represents a moderate, electoral Islamism that is very close to what at least some elements of the Arab Muslim Brotherhood affiliates were seeking to become. The AKP government's sympathies with such elements was a stumbling block to greater Turkish-Saudi coordination over Syria specifically and regional events more generally. Differences over the Brotherhood even split the diplomatic front of the Gulf monarchs. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain increased pressure on Qatar to reduce its support for the Brotherhood by staging a

<sup>37</sup> Abdullah Al-Rashid, “The Brothers and the Emirates,” *The Majalla*, 14 February 2013, <<http://www.majalla.com/eng/2013/02/article55238281>>.

<sup>38</sup> Anthony Shadid, “Qatar Wields an Outsize Influence in Arab Politics,” *The New York Times*, 14 November 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/15/world/middleeast/qatar-presses-decisive-shift-in-arab-politics.html>>; Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, “Qatar's Brotherhood Ties Alienate Fellow Gulf States,” *Al-Monitor*, 23 January 2013, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/qatar-muslim-brotherhood.html>>.

<sup>39</sup> “Egypt's Morsi severs ties with Syria, warns of ‘counter-revolution violence’,” *Ahram Online*, 15 June 2013, <<http://english.ahram.org/eg/News/74082.aspx>>.

<sup>40</sup> Mohsin Khan and Richard LeBaron, “What Will the Gulf's \$12 Billion Buy Egypt?” *EgyptSource*, Atlantic Council, 11 July 2013, <<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/what-will-the-gulfs-12-billion-buy-in-egypt>>.

coordinated withdrawal of their ambassadors from Doha. Even within the Salafi camp there are serious divisions. As mentioned above, “democratic salafis” in Egypt and other Arab states could eventually present a serious ideo-

***“The Saudi Government sees Al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates as a mortal threat to its own domestic rule.”***

logical challenge to the Saudi monarchy. That is a challenge for the future. More immediately, the Saudi government sees al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates as a mortal threat to its own domestic rule. The Saudis fought a counterinsurgency campaign against the local al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), in the mid-2000s. They succeeded in driving what was left of AQAP into Yemen, where it remains an element in the chaotic Yemeni domestic scene and a latent challenge to the Saudis at home. While individual Saudis have joined al-Qaeda linked groups in Syria, there is no evidence that the Saudi government has supported Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State, despite their common enemy in the Assad regime.

While the severity of the conflict in Syria and Iraq has drawn attention to the sectarian element of the post-Arab Spring struggles for power, these disputes within the Sunni world itself are as important for the future of the region. Tunisia holds out the possibility that democratic Islamists of the Brotherhood variety and more secular political forces can agree on the rules of a democratic game, but the Egyptian experience points in the other direction. The chaotic situation in Libya bears watching in this regard. The rise of both Islamist politics and Salafi jihadi groups dominated the Libyan political scene in the immediate post-Qaddafi period, but the emergence in recent months of renegade general Khalifa Haftar,

vowing to rid Libya of Islamist militias, challenges that trend. Haftar praises President Sisi of Egypt, condemns the Qatari role in Libya, and has ordered Turks to leave the country.<sup>41</sup>

While there is no concrete evidence of the kind of foreign support he is receiving, he is certainly singing from the Saudi-UAE-Egyptian bloc’s hymnbook. Libya seems to have become a part of the intra-Sunni Islamist struggle to define what Islam means for politics in the Middle East.

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<sup>41</sup> Mary Fitzgerald, “General Haftar’s Anti-Islamist Campaign Divides Libyans,” BBC, 7 June 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27715992>>; “Renegade General Khalifa Haftar Launches Offensive in East Libya,” Reuters, 15 June 2014, <<http://www.voanews.com/content/reu-renagate-general-launches-offensive-in-east-libya/1937395.html>>; Sami Kohen, “Why is Turkey becoming a target in Libya?,” *Al-Monitor*, 26 June 2014, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/06/turkey-target-libya-expulsion-hifter.html>>.

## THE PARADOX OF POWER

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It is axiomatic that as the state recedes in power and control non-state actors become more important in a country's domestic politics. That has certainly been the case in the new Middle East cold war. The Islamic State, Hizballah, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Houthis, the Sadrists, and more Libyan militias than anyone can keep track of now get headlines that were once reserved for national governments. The spectacular advance of what was then ISIS in Iraq in June of 2014, at least temporarily at the head of a broader Sunni revolt against the Maliki government, highlights the centrality of non-state actors. They are often the allies and clients of the regional states who are playing the new cold war game, but they each have their own particular agendas as well. Those agendas are deeply embedded in their own domestic contexts. Generalizing about them, aside from the obvious fact of their growing importance as the state weakens, is not possible. A detailed analysis of even the most important of the non-state actors is beyond the scope of this work.

In the new Middle East cold war, the key to success is for a regional power to be able to support these non-state clients and allies effectively in their domestic political battles in the weak states of the Arab world. A state's own military power is not a particularly useful tool in this game. The clearest evidence of this is the fact that the two strongest military powers in the region, Israel and Turkey, have not been able to play very effectively in the cold war, while Qatar, a regional Lilliputian in terms of conventional military power, has. Effective patronage of regional allies requires money and guns, to be sure, but it also requires transnational ideological and political connections that make

potential clients open to a relationship with the patron. Those connections are now more important than conventional military strength in affecting the course of regional politics.

Israel is an extreme case of a regional military powerhouse that lacks those political connections. It attempted to play into the domestic politics of a weak Arab state in Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s, using its superior military power and its alliance with the Lebanese Forces to try to remake the Lebanese state in 1982-84. That effort was a costly failure and soured the Israelis on such ambitious ventures. Even their more limited effort to use their military superiority to cut Hizballah down to size in 2006 backfired. Other than the occasional missile strike in Syria against convoys headed to Lebanon, the Israelis have stayed out of the post-Arab Spring struggle for regional influence. They fear the consequences of regime change, not only where they were comfortable with the regime, as in Egypt, but also where the regime is an opponent, as in Syria. They have no natural allies in any of the domestic struggles for power. Despite their overwhelming conventional military superiority, they are non-players in the new Middle East cold war. The best they can do is press the United States to take positions that they prefer (in favor of the coup government in Egypt, for example).

Turkey is a more complicated case of military strength and political weakness. The AKP government does have natural allies in many of the arenas of the new Middle East cold war, most notably Muslim Brotherhood movements and the Islamist opposition across the border in Syria. It clearly had wanted to play a larger role

in the Middle East in the years leading up to the Arab Spring. The Turkey of the 2000s portrayed an effective model of democracy, moderate Islamist politics, and economic success to a region that lacked all three. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's policy of "no problems with neighbors" had eased historic strains with the Arab world and with Iran. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's very public criticism of Israel gained him fans across the Arab world. For those who saw "soft power" as the new means for increasing a country's international influence, Turkey looked like an excellent case study.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 upended some of the premises of the AKP government's outreach in the Middle East. Turkey initially expressed opposition to the NATO operation in Libya,<sup>42</sup> but Erdogan pivoted quickly, coming around to back the revolt against Qaddafi. In September 2011 he took a "victory lap," visiting Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia to tout the Turkish model for political development.<sup>43</sup> The electoral victories of Ennahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt seemed to herald the possibility of a "democratic Islamist bloc" emerging in the Middle East with Turkey in a leadership role. Soft power seemed triumphant.

***"Nowhere did the Arab Spring discombobulate Turkish foreign policy more than in Syria"***

Nowhere did the Arab Spring discombobulate Turkish foreign policy more than in Syria. The AKP government had gone out of its way to smooth Turkey's historically tense relations

with Damascus. The two capitals dropped barriers to their citizens crossing the border and encouraged business investment. Erdogan developed a personal relationship with Bashar al-Assad, meeting him numerous times amidst media portrayals of a close friendship between the leaders.

Despite the warming of Turkey's relations with the Ba'athist government, Ankara quickly demonstrated its sympathies with the Syrian protesters. Foreign Minister Davutoglu visited Damascus in August 2011 and publicly urged Assad to undertake political reform. In November 2011, Erdogan became one of the first world leaders to call for Assad to step down in the face of the Syrian protests.<sup>44</sup> Even earlier, Ankara had begun to support Assad's opponents by allowing the Syrian National Council, the original body of exiled Syrian opposition politicians, to operate out of Istanbul. The Free Syrian Army and other armed opposition groups used Turkish territory for bases amid evidence that the Turkish government was providing support to Islamist factions of the opposition.<sup>45</sup> As of early 2014, Turkey has also hosted over 600,000 Syrian refugees.<sup>46</sup>

By 2013, however, Turkey's enthusiasm for involvement in the Syrian civil war was beginning to wane. The 2011 hopes that the Syrian regime would fall relatively quickly, as others had that year, had faded. The refugee burden was growing, with no end in sight. The emerging strength of more extreme Sunni jihadi elements in the armed opposition threatened to bring al-Qaeda-linked groups and their violence into Turkey itself. Meanwhile,

<sup>42</sup> "Erdogan's Lament," *The Economist*, 7 April 2011, <<http://www.economist.com/node/18530682>>.

<sup>43</sup> Steven A. Cook, "Erdogan's Middle East Victory Lap," *Foreign Affairs*, 15 September 2011, <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68269/steven-a-cook/erdogans-middle-eastern-victory-lap>>.

<sup>44</sup> Sebnem Arsu, "Turkish Premier Urges Assad to Quit in Syria," *The New York Times*, 22 November 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/world/middleeast/turkish-leader-says-syrian-president-should-quit.html>>.

<sup>45</sup> Bayram Balci, "Turkey's Relations with the Syrian Opposition," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 April 2012, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/04/13/turkey-s-relations-with-syrian-opposition/a88u#>>. Regan Doherty and Amena Bakr, "Exclusive: Secret Turkish nerve center leads aid to Syria rebels," Reuters, 27 July 2012, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/27/us-syria-crisis-centre-idUSBRE86Q0JM20120727>>.

<sup>46</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Syrian regional refugee response," 19 February 2014, <<https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>>.



the summer 2013 demonstrations against the Erdogan government in Istanbul and other cities and the political rift between the prime minister and the Gulen movement refocused the AKP's attention on domestic problems. By the end of 2013, there were numerous signals that Ankara's focus had shifted, at least partially, from removing Assad to limiting the political effects of the Syrian civil war on Turkey itself.<sup>47</sup>

While Erdogan has publicly, on a number of occasions, called for international military intervention in Syria, he has been unwilling to use the powerful Turkish army unilaterally in the conflict. Turkish public opinion is clearly against military involvement. The military itself, though cowed by Erdogan's successful political campaign against its political role in the 2000s, is hesitant to take the fight into Syria.<sup>48</sup> It is hard not to draw the conclusion that Turkey's efforts to direct the politics of Syria have failed. When it comes to civil wars, the AKP government has learned the hard way that soft power is not very useful.

Qatar, on the other hand, though it is a state with a miniscule population and no military power to speak of, has had an outsized influence on the new Middle East cold war. That influence is based in part on Doha's enormous wealth, but two other elements to the Qatari strategy have given the tiny country regional clout. The first is an information strategy, through its sponsorship of Al Jazeera. The Qatari leadership was

smart enough to know that it had to allow the station a wide range of editorial independence in order for it to earn the credibility necessary to gain a widespread regional audience.<sup>49</sup> Al Jazeera did just that, and when the Arab uprisings began, it became the primary medium through which the momentous events of 2011 were conveyed to the Arab world (and, to some extent, beyond). As a result, the Qataris were able to influence regional and global perceptions of events with blanket coverage of the situation in Egypt, sympathetic portrayals of the opposition in Libya and Syria, and very little coverage of the uprising in fellow GCC monarchy Bahrain.

***“Qatar has had an outsized influence on the new Middle East cold war”***

The second element of the Qatari influence strategy was to pick a side—that of Sunni Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. Al Jazeera had long broadcast the popular “Sharia and Life” program of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood thinker Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who made Qatar his residence in exile. With the uprisings of 2011, Qatar intervened more directly in support of Islamist elements in Libya and Syria.<sup>50</sup> The then-emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, paid a state visit to Hamas-controlled Gaza in October 2012, bringing hundreds of millions of dollars in aid.<sup>51</sup> Qatar was the largest source of financial aid for the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in post-Mubarak Egypt.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Tim Arango, “Erdogan, Syrian Rebels Leading Ally, Hesitates,” *The New York Times*, 17 October 2013, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/18/world/middleeast/erdogan-syria-rebels-leading-ally-hesitates-31-months-in.html>>; Amberin Zaman, “Turkey backing off support for jihadists on Syria border,” *Al-Monitor*, 18 November 2013, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/turkey-backs-off-support-syria-rebels-border.html>>.

<sup>48</sup> Drew Desilver, “Turkey’s leader urges more aid for Syrian rebels, but most Turks say no,” Pew Research Center, 16 May 2013, <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/05/16/turkeys-leader-urges-more-aid-for-syrian-rebels-but-most-turks-say-no/>>; Soner Cagaptay, “Why Turkey Won’t Attack Syria,” *The Atlantic*, 9 April 2013, <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/why-turkey-wont-attack-syria/274806/>>.

<sup>49</sup> The station had certainly been accused of tilting its coverage to fit Qatari foreign policy goals even before the Arab Spring. Robert F. Worth, “Al Jazeera No Longer Nips at Saudis,” *The New York Times*, 4 January 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/04/world/middleeast/04jazeera.html>>.

<sup>50</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick and Rod Nordland, “Tripoli Divided as Rebels Jostle to Fill Power Vacuum,” *The New York Times*, 30 August 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/31/world/africa/31tripoli.html>>; Colum Lynch, “Qatar’s support for Islamists muddles its reputation as neutral broker in Middle East,” *The Washington Post*, 28 November 2012, <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/qatars-support-for-islamists-muddles-its-reputation-as-neutral-broker-in-mideast/2012/11/28/a9f8183a-f92e-11e1-8398-0327ab83ab91\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/qatars-support-for-islamists-muddles-its-reputation-as-neutral-broker-in-mideast/2012/11/28/a9f8183a-f92e-11e1-8398-0327ab83ab91_story.html)>; Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith, “How Qatar seized control of the Syrian revolution,” *Financial Times*, 17 May 2013, <<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de.html#axzz2a4v4HArN>>.

While the Brotherhood and similar groups were doing well, the Qatari strategy paid dividends. Sustaining such a prominent role in regional politics was difficult for a small country like Qatar, despite its vast wealth and the ambition of its former emir. Its close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood set it against Saudi Arabia and other GCC partners, culminating in the aforementioned March 2014 spat. Its prominent role in Libya and Syria led to local backlashes against it. The United States, its ultimate security guarantor, pressed it to rein in its support for Syrian Islamists.<sup>53</sup> The coup against the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt in July 2013 demonstrated the tenuousness of Qatari geopolitical gains. With the abdication of Sheikh Hamad as emir in June 2013, the ascension of his son Tamim as the new emir and the retirement from public life of Sheikh Hamad's main partner in Qatar's ambitious global strategy, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, it appears that Qatar is scaling down its regional strategy, though it is difficult to determine just what foreign policy line the new emir will settle upon.<sup>54</sup> While the costs of failure in the new Middle East cold war are substantial, the costs of success are not inconsiderable.

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<sup>51</sup> Jodi Rudoren, "Qatar's Emir Visits Gaza, Pledging \$400 Million to Hamas," *The New York Times*, 23 October 2012, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/24/world/middleeast/pledging-400-million-qatari-emir-makes-historic-visit-to-gaza-strip.html>>.

<sup>52</sup> Regan Doherty and Maggie Flick, "Qatar throws Egypt \$3 bln lifeline amid IMF talks," Reuters, 10 April 2013, <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/04/10/uk-egypt-qatar-talks-idUKBRE9390B920130410>>.

<sup>53</sup> Amena Bakr and Mariam Karouny, "Qatar, allies tighten coordination of arms flows to Syria," Reuters, 14 May 2013, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/14/us-syria-qatar-support-idUSBRE94D0GT20130514>>.

<sup>54</sup> Sigurd Neubauer, "Qatar's Changing Foreign Policy," Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 8 April 2014, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2014/04/08/qatar-s-changing-foreign-policy/h7gd>>.

## THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

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Complaints about the inconsistency of current American policy in the Middle East are almost as common as complaints about its passivity.<sup>55</sup> The United States is trying to limit Iranian influence in Syria, but negotiating with Iran on nuclear weapons. It is backing the Iranian-allied government in Iraq against a Sunni Muslim insurgency in which Islamists play a large role, but opposing the Iranian-allied government in Syria and supporting a Sunni Muslim insurgency in which Islamists play a large role. It calls for the downfall of the Assad regime but backs away from the use of force against it, and then becomes, indirectly, its partner in an agreement to rid Syria of its chemical weapons. It argues for democracy in Egypt but refuses to call the military coup there by its name. One can multiply this list further.

That inconsistency should not surprise. The United States does not view the region through the lens of the new Middle East cold war. While it is concerned about the regional balance of power, its interests are not as directly tied up with every twist and turn of the contest for influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia. To state it flatly, who rules Syria is not as important to Washington as it is to Riyadh and to Tehran. The Obama Administration has an

array of goals in the Middle East that cross over the lines of the new Middle East cold war, and it seems perfectly comfortable with that.

A nuclear deal with Iran is clearly one of the Administration's top priorities. It will not allow Iranian behavior in Syria, Lebanon, or Iraq to stand in the way of securing that deal, if the P5+1 negotiating process produces one. That does not mean, however, as some in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states think, that Washington is willing to concede the Middle East as an Iranian sphere of influence in order to get that deal.<sup>56</sup> One can hardly imagine a United States so closely aligned with Israel agreeing to accept a dominant Iranian regional role. On the contrary, the Administration sees a nuclear deal as part of a longer-term strategy to limit Iranian regional influence and reintegrate a more moderate Iran into the global political economy. It has taken numerous steps, including the President's own visit to Riyadh in March 2014, to reassure the Saudis that a nuclear deal with Tehran does not mean a geopolitical "grand bargain" confirming Iranian regional dominance. Washington is pursuing negotiations with Iran on nuclear issues while pressing Iraq to avoid further integration into Tehran's sphere of influence, supporting (somewhat)

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Doyle McManus, "On foreign policy, a consistently inconsistent president," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 September 2013, <<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/sep/18/opinion/la-oe-mcmanus-column-obama-foreign-policy-20130918>>.

<sup>56</sup> There has been a steady stream of comments from Saudi officials and analysts around the theme of the United States' unreliability as an ally. Abdulaziz Sager, "Wither GCC-US Relations?" *Arab News*, 29 March 2013, <<http://www.arabnews.com/news/446395>>; Abdallah al-Sammari, "Ma huwa al-badil 'an Washington?" [Who is the alternative to Washington?], *al-Yaum*, 16 September 2013, <<http://www.alyaum.com/News/art/95080.html>>; Matthew Kaminski, "Prince Alwaleed bin Talal: An Ally Frets About American Retreat," *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 November 2013, <<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304337404579211742820387758>>. Others argue that the United States has cut a deal with Iran as part of its desire to distance itself from the region. Angus McDowell, "Insight: Saudis brace for 'nightmare' of U.S.-Iran rapprochement," Reuters, 9 October 2013, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/09/us-saudi-usa-iran-insight-idUSBRE9980IT20131009>>; Khalid al-Dakheel, "Madha ba'd rafid al-sa'udiyya 'udwiyyat majlis al-'amn?" [What after the Saudi Refusal of the Security Council Seat?], *al-Hayat*, 19 October 2013, <<http://alhayat.com/OpinionsDetails/563309>>.

<sup>57</sup> "US presses Iraq on report of Iran arms deal," BBC, 25 February 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26335449>>.

the Syrian opposition, and arming the Gulf states.<sup>57</sup> Though negotiating with the Iranians on nuclear issues while opposing their regional influence might seem “inconsistent” to some, it simply reflects the Administration’s longer-term view of American regional interests.

Likewise, the Administration sees any resurgence of al-Qaeda and its affiliates in the region as a serious threat, for understandable reasons. Its drone policy in Yemen and Pakistan is evidence enough of how seriously it views this threat. Its immediate support for the Maliki government in Iraq in the face of ISIS gains in June 2014 demonstrated the primacy of the Salafi jihadi threat in its regional priorities. It is therefore not surprising that the Administration is more cautious than Saudi Arabia in its dealings with a Syrian opposition in which an al-Qaeda affiliate (Jabhat al-Nusra), a group even al-Qaeda disavowed (the Islamic State), and other al-Qaeda-friendly Salafi groups are playing important roles. Saudi Arabia is simply more comfortable with long-bearded Sunni Muslim fighters than is the United States, though it too increasingly realizes the dangerous political consequences of the fighting in Syria and Iraq for its own domestic security.

Washington would like to see Assad gone from power, as it regularly states, but it is not willing to subordinate its interest in preventing the regional resurgence of al-Qaeda to that goal. It would like to see Iranian influence in Iraq reduced, but not if the price is an increased role for Salafi jihadis like those of the Islamic State. What others see as inconsistency is, for the Obama Administration, simply balancing its regional interests. This balancing act not only involves America’s regional interests, but also the Administration’s broader political interest in avoiding American involvement in another Middle Eastern war. All this might add up to an “inconsistent” foreign policy toward the new Middle East cold war, but it is an inconsistency based on the Administration’s reading of America’s complicated regional interests.

The longer-term challenge of the new Middle East cold war is as daunting as it is simple: building states that can effectively govern their societies. Effective governance in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, and Libya would drastically reduce the opportunities for regional powers to meddle across their borders and thus limit the scope of regional balance of power struggles. Sub-state actors in effectively governed states will have less reason to seek out foreign patrons, and, if they do, an effective state will prevent them from establishing such ties. Effectively governed states do not become havens for transnational terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Building effective governance that is basically democratic and respectful of citizens’ human and civil rights is an even more daunting task. That kind of governance is the most stable and effective in the long-term, no doubt, but there is no consensus about how a state reaches that sweet spot of stable and decent government. The road to that point is not only bumpy, it is foggy.

The United States demonstrated in Iraq that it is much better at state-destroying than state-building. With limited resources and even more limited political will, Washington is not going to play a major role in the reconstruction of effective political authority in Arab states. That is for the best. America has no better map for that bumpy and foggy road than anyone else. With that appropriate sense of modesty, Washington can safeguard its interests by following a number of relatively simple rules:

- 1) Remember that the new Middle East cold war is not America’s war. While the United States has core interests to protect in the Middle East, as of yet the new cold war has not directly threatened those interests. Oil continues to flow from the Gulf region. As difficult as the refugee spillover from Syria has been for American allies in Turkey and Jordan, it has not destabilized those countries, even as it has encouraged the upsurge in violence in Iraq.

<sup>57</sup> “US presses Iraq on report of Iran arms deal,” *BBC News*, 25 February 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26335449>>.

Israel is certainly affected by the events in Syria and Lebanon, but it is not directly threatened by them. Al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and its ideological counterparts like the Islamic State have gained from the chaos in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, but those gains are limited and its affiliates are consumed with the local fighting to this point. Certainly many good things would flow from an end to the Syrian fighting, like lessening the threat of political instability in Lebanon, but Lebanese political stability is hardly a sufficient reason to justify an increased American military role in Syria. It is just not that important for American interests.

The Middle East is a multi-polar region, with a number of important regional powers acting in its politics: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt. If one of them seems to be emerging as a dominant force, the others will naturally work to balance against it and limit the growth of its power.<sup>58</sup> That is what happened to Gamal Abd al-Nasir in the 1960s and what happened to revolutionary Iran in the 1980s. In each of these cases the United States aided the states who were balancing against the prospective regional hegemon, but also kept some distance. Washington can confidently avoid direct military involvement in the new Middle East cold war by following a similar strategy and relying on regional balance of power dynamics to block Iranian hegemony. It is highly unlikely that the Iranians will turn the new Middle East cold war hot by using their military power to try to alter the regional map, as Saddam Hussein did with his invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Even if they do, other regional powers will welcome and cooperate with a similar American military intervention to restore the status-quo. Those balancing dynamics go double for non-state actors like the Islamic State, which has no regional friends at all. To the extent that the Islamic State can consolidate its gains in Iraq, which is not assured, it will see not only Iran but also Turkey and Saudi Arabia start to work against it.

2) Order is better than chaos, so support the states that have continued to provide effective governance, even if that governance does not achieve the preferred levels of democracy and human rights. That means all sorts of things that run against many of the talking points one frequently hears in Washington:

- It means exploring every avenue to a new relationship with the Rouhani government in Iran, despite our opposition to Iranian policy in various parts of the Middle East. This is a difficult and frustrating task, because Rouhani does not control all the levers of power in Tehran. He will not be able to do everything the United States would like. It will require patience in Washington and a willingness to tolerate setbacks. Nevertheless, the success of Rouhani and his allies against their domestic opponents is the best long-term hope for a more normal Iranian-American relationship and a less disruptive Iranian regional role. America's ability to affect the course of domestic political struggles in Iran is very limited, to be sure. Still, reaching a mutually acceptable agreement on the Iranian nuclear question that satisfies the P5+1 goal of moving Iran back from nuclear breakout capability while allowing Rouhani to claim a victory through sanctions reduction and the re-integration of Iran into the world economy would certainly strengthen his position in internal Iranian politics.
- Order and chaos are now in a delicate balance in Iraq due to the gains of the Islamic State and the broader but fractious Sunni revolt. It would be ideal if Washington could leverage the threat of the revolt to push Prime Minister Maliki to broaden his government and change his autocratic style, bringing credible Sunni Arab leaders into the government and giving them the resources to combat Salafi jihadism and the

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<sup>58</sup> L. Carl Brown, *International Politics of the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

remnants of the Saddam Hussein government in their territories. That ideal result is unlikely, however, given Maliki's obvious deficiencies, the role of Iran in Iraqi politics, and the poverty of leadership in the Iraqi political class generally. The more immediate task is to make sure that the Islamic State is defeated on the battlefield. To the extent that its momentum is turned back, its allies in the Sunni community will begin to distance themselves from the group. At that point, but not before, it would make sense for the United States to use whatever clout it still has in Iraq to press for a more inclusive government. In the meantime, Washington should be engaged with all the regional powers, including Iran, to prepare for coordinated pressure on all Iraqi parties to form a more inclusive and effective government after the the Islamic State threat has been turned back. The message from the United States and from the relevant regional players to Iraq's Sunni Arabs should be, "all things are possible if the Islamic State is defeated; nothing is possible as long as the Islamic State is ascendant."

- Egypt does not face the daunting problems of Iraq, but it is not going in the right direction. Still, the United States should continue to engage with the military government in Egypt, while rejecting President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's transparent efforts to stoke anti-American feeling in Egypt to strengthen his domestic position. The United States should deal with him straight if he reciprocates and if he continues to follow a foreign policy that maintains cooperation with the United States and peace with Israel. Washington can express its preferences for greater democratic and liberal reforms in Egypt, but it has to deal with the Egyptian government as it is.

Preferring order to chaos also means continuing policies that are not controversial in Washington, but remain very important:

- Jordan is an island of stability and decent governance in the Arab East, even as it fails to achieve hoped-for standards of democracy. It is under severe pressure from the Syrian refugee crisis. It deserves all the support the United States can offer.
- Despite tensions with Saudi Arabia on a range of regional issues, the bilateral Saudi-American relationship is an element of regional stability and deserves to be nurtured, as difficult as reassurance of Riyadh can sometimes be. Where the two countries have a common understanding of their interests, there is enormous mutual benefit from cooperation. Where they are not on the same page, as on dealing with Iran, Washington should not be overly worried about Saudi complaints. Saudi Arabia needs its American security connection all the more as regional instability continues.
- There is no particular pressure, either in Washington or in the Gulf states, for a reduction in the American military role there. Given regional uncertainties and the exaggerated fears of some in the Gulf of American abandonment, there is every reason to sustain the current American military infrastructure in Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman.
- Bahrain is the most difficult case among the Gulf states in which the United States has military facilities, given the continued political unrest on the island, but there is no short-term incentive for an American military withdrawal from Bahrain at this time. It is better to stay engaged and keep encouraging those elements of the ruling family who are working for some kind of political reconciliation, while realizing that a full reconciliation will probably require an improvement in Saudi-Iranian relations.
- There is not much the United States can effectively do to affect the current political crisis in Turkey, but sustaining good bilateral relations makes both geopolitical and economic sense.

3) An improvement in Saudi-Iranian relations would greatly enhance the chances for political settlements in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain and would lessen the poisonous sectarianism that so dominates the region's politics now. It would certainly be in the United States' interest to see such an improvement. Despite the intense hostility between the two countries, it is not impossible to imagine a situation in which both sides would see it in their interests to work toward more normal relations. There are certainly serious obstacles to such a rapprochement, but Riyadh and Tehran have had a much more civil and less contentious relationship even as recently as the mid-2000s.<sup>59</sup> Yet it would be counter-productive for the United States to push the Saudis toward Iran. There is already considerable suspicion in Riyadh that the United States has cut a geopolitical deal with Iran, and an American effort to encourage the Saudis to come to terms with Iran would be seen as part of that deal and undoubtedly resisted. Better to let the Saudis decide for themselves when and how to try to address their differences with Iran. There are plenty of incentives for them to do so, if the Iranians are willing to respond in kind.

4) Multilateral is more effective than unilateral, if feasible. Sanctions on Iran really began to bite when countries other than the United States joined in, and negotiations with Iran required the cover of the P5 + 1 to gain any momentum. That momentum has led to tentative bilateral contacts between Tehran and Washington, but it is hard to imagine how that would have happened without both multi-lateral initiatives. Multilateral approaches will also be more effective in cutting the Islamic State down to size in Iraq. Any diplomatic effort to staunch the violence in Syria will likewise have to be multilateral, as frustrating as that process has been. While the Geneva process on Syria has not yielded any progress on the political level, it is useful to have a process in place in case there

are changes in the correlation of forces, either on the ground in Syria or in Russia's attitude toward the conflict. If the nuclear negotiations with Iran succeed, it would make sense to consider including Iran in the Geneva framework, if Tehran would be willing to induce their client Hizballah to reduce its involvement in the conflict.

Likewise, multilateral approaches with the EU will be more effective at bolstering North Africa's (relative) success stories like Morocco, supporting the important but still fragile transition in Tunisia, pushing Algeria toward a more inclusive political system and aiding, to the extent possible, the building of state institutions in Libya. For all the North African countries, economic relations with Europe are far more important than those with the United States. Any commitment of diplomatic or financial resources there will be much more effective if combined with European partners whose interests in North Africa are greater than America's.

These policies, taken together, are certainly "inconsistent" when viewed through the lens of the new Middle East cold war. In some instances they support the "pro-Iranian" side, in others, the "pro-Saudi" side. The United States should not define its interests this way. It needs to focus on core interests of securing oil production and oil flows, combatting terrorist groups that target the United States and its allies, and preventing the spill-over of regional violence into the politics of stable American allies. Concentrating American policy on the states that actually govern, acting multilaterally both to pressure foes and support friends, and remembering that U.S. interests are not as directly engaged in the new Middle East cold war as those of the local parties are the keys to riding out this particular violent and difficult period in the region.

<sup>59</sup> F. Gregory Gause, III, "Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement? The Incentives and the Obstacles," in "Visions of Gulf Security," POMEPS Studies no. 25, Project on Middle East Political Science, 25 March 2014, <pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Visions\_of\_Gulf\_Security.pdf>, 7-9.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Gregory Gause, III is a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Doha Center. In August 2014 he will take up the John H. Lindsey '44 Chair in international affairs at the Bush School of Government, Texas A&M University. He is the author of three books and numerous articles on the politics of the Middle East, with a particular focus on the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf.

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