Visions of Gulf Security

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# The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.
Online Article Index

Please see http://pomeps.org/2014/03/17/visions-of-gulf-security-memos/ for online versions of all of the articles in this collection.
The turbulence in Gulf security politics today is difficult to miss: unusually sharp public splits in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), rising sectarian tensions, tough moves against the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements, and markedly harsh crackdowns on even minor forms of public dissent. Gulf elites are openly airing profound doubts about the future of the U.S. regional role, worries about blowback from Syria, and fears about the implications of a Western rapprochement with Iran. Regime efforts to insulate themselves from popular dissent have included potentially unsustainable economic commitments and self-defeating internal repression. Meanwhile, deep political divisions are disrupting the long-standing security partnership between Washington and the GCC states.

How has the turbulence of the last three years affected security in the Gulf? Do new domestic, regional, or international trends fundamentally alter how the regimes, political movements, and people of the region grapple with challenges to their security? How new are these challenges, and how extraordinary the responses? What is gained, and what potentially distorted, by viewing these events through a security lens? Which assumptions in the academic literature about Gulf security have proven resilient, and which require rethinking? On March 9, 2014, POMEPS and Matteo Legrenzi at Ca’ Foscari University brought together more than a dozen scholars based in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States to Venice, Italy to look closely at the new – or not so new – questions about Gulf security.

This should be the finest hour for the “regime security” perspective, which has been the dominant theoretical framework for understanding the region’s security politics in recent years. The regime security framework emerged to challenge the conventional Realist view of states primarily responding to external power and threat in their alliance and foreign policy choices. As Gregory Gause and many other scholars have effectively demonstrated, regimes faced threats to their own power and survival from within as well, and often prioritized those in their policy choices. Iran’s “threat” to Riyadh, for instance, had as much to do with its potential appeal to Saudi Shiites as it did with its pursuit of a nuclear arsenal.

This perspective seems to offer considerable traction on the domestic and regional maneuverings of Gulf regimes in the last few years. While no GCC regimes fell in the face of popular protest, the Arab uprisings clearly intensified and sharpened those internal regime security concerns. And, as several of the memos in this collection observe, the responses by Gulf states to these concerns included both domestic security crackdowns and regional foreign policy initiatives. The coordinated campaigns against the Muslim Brotherhood across the Middle East by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as Stéphane Lacroix, David Roberts, and Guido Steinberg suggest, reflected this logic of shoring up domestic power through foreign policy activism. So did the financial and political support by wealthy Gulf monarchies for less well-endowed fellow monarchs across the region.
The utility of the regime security lens should not distract analysts from its potentially dangerously distorting effects. As Toby Jones has argued, the regimes of the Gulf have often embraced crisis as a useful device for extracting international support and suppressing domestic dissent. After all, casting the political aspirations of the Shiites of Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, large numbers of Bahraini citizens, or youth activists demanding political reforms as a “security” challenge serves to delegitimize their political concerns and to justify a repressive response. Fred Wehrey, in this collection, notes how Saudi or Bahraini elites have for decades framed demands for political rights by oppressed Shiite communities as “security” threats linked to Iranian ambition. The labeling of the Muslim Brotherhood as a “terrorist” group has much less to do with security than with politics. As useful as the regime security framework appears for understanding the behavior of Gulf regimes over the last few years, then, there is also good reason to critically assess the constitutive effects of internalizing and naturalizing such a security discourse.

Gulf confusion and concern about changes at the global level also run through the memos in this collection. Gulf elites worry about the implications of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, refusal to intervene directly in Syria, and enthusiasm to negotiate with Iran over its nuclear program. Despite the continued deployment of U.S. troops across the region, as Gary Sick observes, many of these elites are troubled by the thought of a reduced U.S. security presence and willingness to deploy military force. At the same time, they profoundly disagree with Washington’s willingness to accept democratic change and a Muslim Brotherhood political role in Egypt and the rest of the region over the last several years. For several years, leading Gulf states have not just disagreed with the United States but have been actively working to undermine U.S. policy goals. At what point do such divergent worldviews and policy preferences challenge the concept of an “alliance?” What does this portend for the future of the alliance at the heart of the region’s security architecture?

The memos in POMEPS Studies #25: Visions of Gulf Security offer no new unified theory of Gulf security politics, but they point to some of the pressing new theoretical and practical challenges confronting the region. What happened to the human security agenda (Kristian Coates Ulrichsen)? Where do the region’s youth fit in the new security politics (Kristin Smith Diwan)? Is it possible to incorporate Iran into a regional security architecture (Rouzbeh Parsi, Gary Sick, and Gregory Gause)? How will the campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood rebound on regional and domestic politics (Stéphane Lacroix, Guido Steinberg, and David Roberts)? How does Iraq’s shaky future affect regional security challenges (Toby Dodge)? What drives the dangerous new sectarian strife in the region and can it be reversed (Fred Lawson, Richard Norton, and Fred Wehrey)? And, finally, do our currently dominant theories offer an effective guide to the region’s security politics (Mehran Kamrava) – and how should those theories be adapted in response to new developments?

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
March 24, 2014
Visions of Persian Gulf security

By Mehran Kamrava, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar

Security in the Persian Gulf has been an issue of perennial concern to the states of the region as well as to the United States, Europe, and, more recently, East Asia. As patterns of energy exports from the Persian Gulf shift increasingly in the direction of East Asia, China, Japan, South Korea, and India they also find themselves paying more attention to the security of the region.

In broad terms, security challenges to the Persian Gulf may be divided into three, interrelated categories. These categories include more conventional security challenges that revolve around regional and international balance of power dynamics; more recent security challenges that arise out of greater levels of globalization and economic development; and security challenges whose roots tend to lie in the domestic and regional political economies.

As a strategic region with its share of cross-border tensions and international competition, the Persian Gulf has seen some of the bloodiest conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries so far. The security concerns that arise as a result generally revolve around balance of power considerations, regional rivalry, and domestic and regional stability. The Persian Gulf has fertile breeding ground for multiple, interlocking rivalries and competitions, many of which have at one time or another spilled over into open conflict. Some of the more notable examples of these regional tensions have revolved around Iran’s supposedly “revolutionary” posture toward its Arab neighbors, Iraq’s policies in the 1990s and the reverberations of its civil war in the 2000s, restive Shiite populations in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Saudi-Qatari rivalries, and U.S. policies across the Middle East and especially in relation to the Persian Gulf region, particularly its stationing of troops there. These balance of power rivalries will continue to pose challenges to the security of the Persian Gulf in the foreseeable future.

A second, related set of security concerns revolves around less conventional, newer challenges that have arisen mostly as a result of the Persian Gulf’s more intimate nexus with the global market economy. These more recent security concerns, many of which are the result of the region’s phenomenal economic growth and development in recent decades, revolve around issues such as food security and guaranteed access to uninterrupted food supplies, cyber security, and the issue of migrant workers, both white and blue collar, and the protection of national identities and entitlements in the face of ever-expansive expatriate populations in countries such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and even Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

Both of these sets of security challenges figure prominently in the calculations of policymakers in the region as well as in Washington and elsewhere. And both, to one extent or another, continue to be valid concerns insofar as domestic and regional calculations and power politics are concerned. The more conventional security concerns, which are anchored in regional balance of power dynamics, appear more deeply entrenched and depend as much on larger, global dynamics as on regional ones, thus invariably drawing in the United States and, to a lesser extent, Britain and the rest of the European Union.

A third, related category of security challenges arises from domestic and regional political economies, especially insofar as the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are concerned. Three particular security challenges in this category stand out. All three overlap with others mentioned. The first has to do with energy security, both in terms of uninterrupted flow and access to open transportation routes and also insofar as shale gas is concerned. The very strategic significance of the Persian Gulf derives from its rich deposits of oil and gas. With the Hormuz Strait as a chokepoint, and with the potential
threat of regional conflict ever-present – between Iran and Israel, for example – the flow of oil and gas supplies from the Persian Gulf to importers in Europe and East Asia is a matter of considerable security concern. Also consequential are advances in the search for alternative energy sources, especially shale gas, some of the richest deposits of which are found in China, the United States, and Canada (as well as in Argentina, Algeria, and Mexico). Although shale gas is yet to pose a serious commercial challenge to global producers of oil and natural gas – especially Qatar, Iran, and Russia – its future commercial potentials are estimated to be considerable and therefore of serious concern to the Persian Gulf.

A second security challenge arises from the consequences of having collapsed states in the proximity of the Persian Gulf. In the 2000s, the collapsed Iraqi and Afghan states became fertile breeding grounds for jihadist militants whose focus was as much transnational as it was national. By and large, however, the chaos that these two countries experienced remained contained within their own borders. In the current decade, with reconstituted states in Iraq and Afghanistan far from able to establish law and order in any meaningful way, there are additional potential collapsed states in Yemen and Syria. The potential fallouts of collapsed states in Yemen and Syria are especially problematic for the Persian Gulf given the intimate involvement of Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the Syrian civil war and the permeable nature of the Saudi-Yemeni border, despite Saudi Arabia’s construction of a security barrier between the two countries.

The third security challenge has to do with the possibility of cracks in the rentier bargains on which Persian Gulf states rely for governance and political legitimacy. Some of the less wealthy GCC states are particularly vulnerable. Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar each have inordinate financial resources and relatively small populations of nationals, and therefore their vast and expansive rentier bargains are unlikely to face serious challenges in the foreseeable future. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman, however, where state revenue per capita is not as extensive, tend to be less well equipped to deal with fluctuations in oil revenue or with other economic and political disruptions. Widespread unrest in Bahrain, scattered protests in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, and instances of disquiet in Oman are already indications that these states’ efforts at buying off political legitimacy through financial and economic largess are not having universal success. In each case, the state has responded with a combination of reinvigorated authoritarianism on the one hand and more extensive rentierism on the other. Nevertheless, especially as the events of post-2011 have demonstrated, the possibility of political instability in the GCC states is not beyond the pale.

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Visions of Gulf Security

Saudi-Iranian rapprochement? The incentives and the obstacles

By F. Gregory Gause, III, University of Vermont

Is it at all realistic to think about the possibility of a rapprochement in the most serious Middle East regional rivalry today? Saudi Arabia and Iran are, in many ways, the drivers of the new Middle East cold war. They have contested for influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and now Syria (and, to a lesser extent, Yemen and the smaller Gulf states). They are the leading powers on each side of the sectarian divide that helps to fuel many of the region’s conflicts. Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that the intensity of their confrontation is inevitable. As recently as the early 2000s their bilateral relationship was not nearly as conflictual, as both Tehran and Riyadh pursued more normal diplomatic relations with each other even as they jostled for influence in the region. Recent domestic trends hold out the prospect for a reassessment of each country’s regional foreign policy, in ways that could lead them to explore a return to that earlier period of subdued rather than open conflict. The obstacles to rapprochement are real. Domestic actors in both countries would stand against a lowering of the region’s sectarian temperature. The structural reality of a number of civil conflicts in weak Arab states, where the contesting parties seek out the aid of Tehran and Riyadh, makes the kind of mutual forbearance such a rapprochement would require more difficult to achieve. Despite these obstacles, it is not impossible to imagine movement toward a more normal relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the coming years.

An impossible scenario?

There are numerous reasons why Saudi-Iranian relations should be conflictual. Since the Iranian Revolution, they have represented two opposite poles of Islamist politics – a revolutionary republic versus a conservative monarchy, each claiming that it speaks most legitimately for “Islam” in the political sphere. The sectarian Sunni-Shiite divide, even sharper given Wahhabism’s virulent anti-Shiite position, simply exacerbates that profound ideological conflict. Add on to this a natural geopolitical rivalry in the Gulf and somewhat different interests on oil questions, and you have the makings of a tense bilateral relationship.

But the level of that tension has risen and fallen over time. The decade of the 1980s was characterized by open conflict. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini publicly characterized monarchy as an un-Islamic form of government. The revolutionary regime actively attempted to spread the Islamic revolution into the Arab world while Saudi Arabia helped to fund Iraq’s war against Iran. The two countries even briefly confronted each other militarily, with Saudi jet fighters shooting down two Iranian jets in 1984. In 1987 Saudi security forces fought Iranian pilgrims during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, resulting in the deaths of 275 Iranians and 87 Saudis.

The death of Khomeini and the end of the Iran-Iraq War led to a cooling of the bilateral temperature. Iran’s two subsequent presidents, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, emphasized that they wanted normal diplomatic relations with Riyadh and toned down the “revolutionary export” element of Iranian foreign policy. There were other actors in Iran, like the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), that did not give up on the export of revolution, but the Iranian government was looking to turn a new page. Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait soured the Saudis on their alliance with Iraqi President

3 Takeyh, Guardians of the Revolution, Chapters 5, 6, and 8.
4 The United States contends that Iran was responsible for the bombing of the Khobar Towers apartment complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in 1996, which killed 19 U.S. military personnel and wounded over 300 Americans, Saudis, and third country nationals. Gause, The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, p. 128-29.
Saddam Hussein and developments in the world oil market in the late 1990s emphasized to Riyadh the necessity of being able to deal in a businesslike manner with Tehran. Even after the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, there were indications that the two sides could maintain a normal relationship. The Saudis hosted Ahmadinejad in Riyadh in April 2007 as the two countries worked together in early 2007 to calm relations between their clients in Lebanon. In all, the bilateral relationship during this period was hardly chummy, but it was not as poisonous as it had been before or has become now.

So the recent past tells us that it is not impossible to imagine a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. This would not be an alliance. The two sides have too many contrary interests. It would not even be the shotgun marriage that characterized relations during the time of the Shah, when Cold War dynamics and a common antipathy toward leftist Arab nationalism brought Riyadh and Tehran together. A rapprochement would simply be an agreement to lower the temperature of their mutual condemnations and to act with self-restraint in order to limit the regional spillover consequences of the Syrian and Iraqi domestic conflicts.

**Domestic trends and the possibility of rapprochement**

On the Iranian side, the election of Hassan Rouhani to the presidency vastly increases the chances of a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. Rouhani’s bumptious predecessor rubbed the Saudis the wrong way on a number of levels, not least of which was his return to the revolutionary rhetoric of the 1980s and his close ties to the IRGC. Iran’s success at beating the Saudis in the regional influence game in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine during Ahmadinejad’s tenure made him even harder for the Saudis to stomach. Rouhani represents a return, or at least the possibility of a return, to the Rafsanjani-Khatami regional foreign policy line that made normal relations with Riyadh an Iranian diplomatic priority. He entered office calling Saudi Arabia “a friend and a brother,” saying that improvement of relations with Gulf neighbors was a top priority of his foreign policy. In the longer term, Rouhani’s election opens up the possibility of an Iranian foreign policy that is more focused on domestic economic development and reintegration into the world economy, and less willing to commit Iranian resources to the Arab world. That is not an immediate prospect, given the uncertainty of regional politics and the Iranian domestic scene. But Rouhani’s desire to return to a more normal bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia is clear.

On the Saudi side, the domestic trends are not as clear. However, the apparent change at the top on Syrian policy is an indicator that Riyadh is increasingly worried about the domestic political consequences of continued regional sectarian conflict. Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, the interior minister who made his name by leading the campaign against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Saudi Arabia itself in the mid-2000s, now seems to be in control of the Syria file. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who ran the file over the past two years, promoted an aggressive policy of Saudi support for Syrian fighters, including Salafi jihadist groups not formally affiliated with al Qaeda. That Prince Mohammad now seems to be in control of the Syria file is an indication that Riyadh might (and I stress, might) be thinking about scaling down its support for the rebels there. There are other straws in the Saudi wind that indicate Riyadh might be refocusing on the potential domestic blow-back of continued fighting in Syria: The kingdom recently adopted a law with harsh penalties for Saudis joining foreign wars, declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization and is in the midst of pressuring Qatar to reduce its support for the Brotherhood regionally. To the extent that Riyadh is concentrating more on enemies from within the Sunni world, it will be more willing to de-emphasize the confrontation with Iran.

These domestic political trends are not definitive, but they indicate that there is a chance that in both Tehran and Riyadh a greater focus on the negative domestic consequences of ambitious regional policies might lead to a willingness on both sides to consider less confrontational policies. Such a mutual willingness is a precondition to a sustainable rapprochement. There are some rumors that both sides are currently exploring this possibility.

5 Gause, The International Relations of the Persian Gulf, Chapter 4.
Obstacles to rapprochement

On each side there are domestic political obstacles to a rapprochement. In Iran, the IRGC is committed to maintaining Iran’s geopolitical gains in the region, including supporting the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. It is also more committed to both the rhetoric and the infrastructure of revolutionary export. To the extent that the IRGC maintains its influence in Iranian foreign policy, it will be more difficult to achieve a new understanding with Saudi Arabia. It is unclear where the Supreme Leader would come down on a confrontation between Rouhani and the IRGC on the issue of a less ambitious Iranian regional policy.

Factionalism is less important in Saudi foreign policy than sclerosis and leadership uncertainty. With the senior leadership in the country so old and succession up in the air, it is possible that Riyadh will be unable to respond positively to signals of Iranian moderation. It remains to be seen whether Prince Mohammad bin Nayef’s apparent control of the Syrian file signals a growing role for him in Saudi foreign policy more generally, or not. Saudi public opinion is not particularly important in the formation of the country’s foreign policy, but the Syrian civil war has evoked strong public feelings of support for the rebels. In a situation of leadership uncertainty, the public opinion factor could be a disincentive for any senior al-Saud figure to be seen as advocating a softer line toward Iran.

Another significant obstacle to a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement is the weakness or collapse of state authority in so many Arab states. The political vacuums in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq invite regional intervention. When the Saudis and the Iranians last enjoyed a period of relatively decent relations, the regional map was more stable – Saddam was weakened but still in power in Baghdad and Syria was a player, not a playing field, in regional politics. There were not as many opportunities to extend a state’s regional influence. Even if both the Saudi and Iranian leaderships are driven simply by defensive motivations, it will be difficult for them to stay out of the civil conflicts that have erupted all over the eastern Arab world. This new structural factor in Middle East international politics, which predates the Arab Spring but which has been exacerbated by it, makes the mutual restraint necessary for a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement harder to achieve.

Conclusion: structure vs. agency

The possibility of a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement depends largely on the political will of leaders on both sides. The structure of regional politics, with civil conflicts engulfing a large number of states in the eastern Arab world, would seem to push the two countries into further conflicts. In each case, elements of domestic politics also work against the possibility that the political will to improve relations can be summoned. In Iran, it is the power of a particular player in the domestic political game, the IRGC, which has ideological and organizational interests in an aggressive regional policy. In Saudi Arabia, it is an aging leadership and the uncertainty of succession politics that militates against decisive political action. It will take concerted actions by leaders who grasp power and choose to follow a more moderate regional foreign policy course to overcome these structural impediments, if there is to be a chance for a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement to occur. There are signs that elements of both leaderships would prefer a less conflictual region and a better bilateral relationship. Whether they have the power to take the steps necessary to achieve those goals is an open question.

The United States would certainly benefit from a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, but it must tread lightly on this issue. Saudi Arabia already fears that the current improvement in Iranian-U.S. relations – as tentative as it is – could lead Washington to ignore Saudi interests in its desire to get a deal with Tehran. Any encouragement from Washington that the Saudis open up to Iran would be seen as part of a U.S. move toward Iran and would be greeted with great suspicion. Better that the Obama Administration let the domestic factors in both countries pushing toward better relations work themselves out without an American nudge.

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The Obama Doctrine

By Gary Sick, Columbia University

Over the past quarter century, the most accurate single factor to explain security developments in the Gulf, as well as the best predictor of the future, has been and is U.S. policy in the region. Since it began to be a significant force, U.S. policy has undergone at least five major shifts. The current policy, which I will call the Obama Doctrine, represents the latest, and possibly one of the most important, iterations.

The expansion of U.S. presence

The United States has become the dominant military, diplomatic, and economic presence in the Gulf. It is, in effect, a leading Gulf power. This has become such an accepted condition that it is easy to forget just how recent and exceptional it is.

The United States relied on the British to maintain security in the Gulf region until their departure in 1971. President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were unable to fill the resulting military vacuum with U.S. forces at a time when the United States was bogged down in Southeast Asia and when public sentiment was hostile to any further foreign military adventures. Their answer was the Nixon Doctrine, relying on the twin pillars of Iran and Saudi Arabia to protect U.S. interests in the region. That policy came to an inglorious end when the Iranian monarchy, the primary U.S. strategic pillar, collapsed in the 1979 Iranian revolution.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Jimmy Carter responded with the Carter Doctrine in his State of the Union address of January 23, 1980, declaring that “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.” This was widely recognized as a hollow threat at the time, since the United States had virtually no military capability apart from a small naval facility in Bahrain and the distant British island base of Diego Garcia. Still, it clearly defined U.S. interests in the region and served as the basis for a slow expansion of U.S. military presence that continued on into the Reagan administration and beyond.

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, more than any other individual or event, was responsible for drawing the United States into a full-fledged military presence in the Gulf. His invasion of Iran in September 1980 started a bloody and devastating eight-year war that spread to the critical oil shipping lanes of the Gulf. The Ronald Reagan administration aligned U.S. strategy with Arab governments against Iran, except for the bizarre and disastrous Iran-contra affair. In 1987, at the request of the Gulf Arab states, the United States placed its flag on a number of Kuwaiti ships and began to move forces into place to protect them from Iranian attack. By the end of the war in 1988, the United States had become a combatant in the regional war, striking Iranian ships and oil platforms that were being used for attacks on Arab shipping and for launching mines.¹

Then, after only two years of uneasy truce, Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. The George H.W. Bush administration responded with a massive military buildup, the greatest and most diverse coalition of regional and extra-regional powers in Middle East history, and a brilliant military campaign that outflanked Saddam’s forces and forced him to sue for peace. Saddam surprised his U.S. adversaries, however, by holding on to power even in defeat. Consequently, and at Arab request, a large contingent of U.S. forces remained in the region, and the string of military facilities up and down the coast that had been

initiated during Operation Desert Storm remained in operation. That substantial force presence was maintained throughout the Bill Clinton administration, which continued to confront Saddam. Otherwise, the Clinton administration was notable primarily for inventing the concept of “dual containment” of Iraq and Iran, which amounted to a kind of watchful waiting, while focusing on the Arab-Israel issue.

Ironically, the preexisting U.S. force presence was instrumental in facilitating the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the George W. Bush administration. That followed the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, in retaliation for the terrorist attacks in New York on 9/11. The number and size of military forces and operating facilities in the Gulf expanded dramatically as the United States fought two regional wars and confronted Iran over the following decade. This was accompanied by a vigorous assertion of U.S. predominance and preemptive determination to shape the politics and historic contours of the region, a strategy that became known as the Bush Doctrine.

The Obama Doctrine

President Obama spent his first term managing the end of the Iraq war and preparing to end the Afghanistan conflict – the longest and most expensive conflicts in U.S. history. He also had a full plate of domestic issues growing out of the Great Recession, together with his own determination to pass sweeping health care legislation. However, at the beginning of Obama’s second term, he and his foreign policy team conducted an extensive review and restructuring of U.S. foreign policy. This was announced in Obama’s address to the United Nations General Assembly on September 24, 2013, and elaborated by his national security adviser one month later in an exclusive interview with the New York Times.

Neither of these announcements attracted the kind of attention and analysis that one might have expected from what was, by any measure, a fundamental shift in U.S. policy in a critical region of the world. The reason for this lack of excitement may be that the new policy contains none of the sweeping language and bold declarations of his predecessors. The policy statement is unusually parsimonious and candid. Here are the defining elements:

- The United States of America is prepared to use all elements of our power, including military force, to secure our core interests in the region.
- We will confront external aggression against our allies and partners, as we did in the Gulf War.
- We will ensure the free flow of energy from the region to the world.
- We will dismantle terrorist networks that threaten our people.
- And finally, we will not tolerate the development or use of weapons of mass destruction.

The drivers of this policy are U.S. core interests, which are immediately defined in a seemingly bland list that is most notable for what it does not say. It does not define the kind of Middle East it would like to see – no mention of liberty, democracy, free markets, human rights, or freedom of the seas. It does not commit the United States to the security of Israel or any other country in the region, only to help defend them against direct external aggression. Ensuring the free flow of oil is inevitable but the statement says nothing about price (“reasonable”) or destination (“free world”), which have often been part of such U.S. declarations. By narrowing U.S. interests to terrorist networks that directly threaten the United States, it vastly reduces the scope of the Bush global war on terrorists. And the focus on development or use of WMD leaves unmentioned any concern about potential nuclear weapons capacity, as opposed to actual possession.

President Obama defines only two specific objectives in this region to occupy the last three years of his presidency: the Iranian nuclear issue and the Israeli-Palestinian
conflict. He does not ignore other issues, but he relegates them to a secondary position. So he says: “We deeply believe it is in our interests to see a Middle East and North Africa that is peaceful and prosperous, and will continue to promote democracy and human rights and open markets.” He immediately adds, however: “democracy cannot simply be imposed by force. Rather, these objectives are best achieved when we partner with the international community and with the countries and peoples of the region.”

In other words, if it does not directly affect the United States of America, it will be dealt with multilaterally.

**Theory and praxis**

This statement, or Doctrine if you like, which appears quite ordinary on the surface, is actually a huge departure from past U.S. policies. It is the triumph of the realist model of international politics. There is not a hint of idealism or grand objectives or open-ended commitments. Instead, it echoes the words of John Quincy Adams that the United States “goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy.”

The Obama Doctrine is a redefinition of U.S. policy that is minimalist, multilateral when possible, and unabashedly self-centered. And all available evidence suggests that it is not just a philosophical tract but rather a working agenda that will drive the Obama administration in its second term. As the brief historical review above showed, doctrines often do not outlive their authors, but we do have a clear and authoritative blueprint that seems to define a specific set of objectives and some rules of the road that can help us look ahead for at least the next three years.

Obama appears to be deadly serious about the pursuit of his two policy imperatives: a negotiated settlement of the Iranian nuclear issue and a possible resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Both of these are fraught with historical baggage and a daunting record of failure. But President Obama has already demonstrated quite clearly that he is prepared to take political heat from the Israeli leadership and the powerful American Israel Public Affairs Committee lobby. He has indicated that he thinks the chances of an Iranian deal no better than 50-50, and the chance of a genuine agreement between Israelis and Palestinians still seems remote. But he does seem determined to give it his best shot. He may fail, but it is unlikely that he will back down in the face of opposition.

A literal reading of the Obama Doctrine would also seem to explain a great deal about what many would regard as policy disarray in Syria. If you start with the assumption that Obama’s primary interest (as he said) was the elimination of Bashar al-Assad’s chemical weapons (WMD), his initial threat to use military force was entirely consistent with his principles. However, when he was offered an alternative and less costly way to accomplish the same objective, he embraced it. His critics were less interested in WMD and were more interested in persuading the United States to use military force to overthrow the Assad regime, and they were bitter in their denunciation of U.S. lack of consistency. There is no question that U.S. Syria policy was less than masterful in execution, but the difference of opinion is really based on a difference of objectives. It is not that Obama departed from his principles – he didn’t – but that other regional states (and domestic critics) disagree with those principles and their implications.

That is likely to remain the sticking point. Obama seems to be committed to a game plan that is anathema to many regional states – specifically Israel and the Sunni Gulf Arab states – as well as neoconservative (and many liberal) internationalists who want a foreign policy that is more engaged and interventionist. At the same time, the American public seems content to avoid more direct U.S. intervention in the Middle East.

The interplay of those powerful forces seems likely to provide much of the foreign policy drama for the United States in the Middle East for at least the next few years.

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The elusive project of common security in the Persian Gulf

By Rouzbeh Parsi, Lund University

The political and security landscape of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East changed drastically with the Iranian revolution in 1979. The United States became increasingly more directly present and involved in maintaining the security of its allies in the Gulf. Through different means the United States tried to balance and constrain the two countries with the most destabilizing behavior and potential: Iran and Iraq. The new security arrangement that grew out of the removal of Iran from the U.S. equation regarding the Gulf included greater emphasis on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a security organization and U.S. military bases.

While much of this was perceived as necessary due to an Iranian – and at times Iraqi – threat, and thus the focus on security, the concomitant political focus was and is lacking. Therefore, tidbits that barely amount to a regional security framework are primarily negative (containing and deterring Iran) and focused on hard security. In short the security agreement was and is doubly inadequate.

However, the basic parameters underwriting this security equation are now changing. In many ways the idea of a security arrangement that would contain, constrain, and essentially ignore a country of Iran’s geopolitical weight can by definition not be open ended. To maintain this imbalance (not to imply that there is a “natural” balance) requires political, military, and economic commitment to offset Iranian potential. As long as the revolutionary phase of the Islamic Republic dominated, and later haunted, the rhetoric and actions of Tehran (always more of the former than the latter) maintaining the imbalance was that much easier. The nuclear issue and its handling by Tehran during the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad presidency also contributed to prolonging the self life of this set up.

But that 30-odd-year period is now coming to an end. Tehran is trying (it remains to be seen if it succeeds) to climb out of the hole that it almost single-handedly put itself in, through its firebrand rhetoric and action and its mismanagement of the nuclear file. Even if the negotiations under President Hassan Rouhani do not result in a clear-cut solution, that anything less than cold war and outright hostility is possible is making waves in the region.

In short, if less is spent on upholding the imbalance, it will inevitably rebalance itself in the sense of Iran becoming part of the equation rather than something the equation is supposed to negate. A re-adjustment of the strategic landscape is the regional equivalent of the global stage debate of the transition from a bipolar or unipolar world to a multipolar world. For many this is policy theater, a buzz word exercise with little actual thought spent on what a rebalance could and will mean. It seems for some, in practice, the reality of multipolarity and its implications have not sunk in yet. Similarly, lip service is paid to the idea of Iran again “becoming part” of the region, but much less thought is paid to what this could mean and how it might or should be shaped. Instead it becomes a canvas on which pseudo-primordial fears are projected.

So regardless of whether Iran is fully reintegrated in the medium term the balance will change and this is the phase, the “transition,” when things are more fluid than usual, which is the most dangerous. For now, expectations and fears must be managed with an eye toward a future yet to be determined – a tall order.

Post-revolutionary Iran and the Gulf

The political elite in Tehran is slowly and reluctantly coming to grips with being a post-revolutionary state. The society has been way ahead of it for quite some time.1

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Thus the rhetorical element buttressing an ideological reading of the region is in high demand as the willingness to act on revolutionary ideals diminishes. Ironically, an ideological reading as an actual assessment of the political landscape seems to have taken hold on the southern shore of the Gulf. The Saudi Arabian perception of an Iranian threat seems to be more ideologically conditioned now than compared to 10 years ago. While this has to do with Iran's nuclear program and Ahmadinejad, it has enough precedent and staying power to cloud judgment of some of the helmsmen in Riyadh. The reality of sectarianism is a hotly debated issue. It ought to be considered as seldom the beginning of the story, though it can become the red thread if it is treated as such and used to mobilize constituencies. In that sense it has a propensity to become a self-fulfilling prophecy: fairly easy to invoke, regardless of whether it was of any actual consequence at that point in time, and once in place so much more difficult to manage or dissolve. One reason for this discrepancy is that it entails mobilizing segments of the population as much as justifying things to the constituents. Not only will it wed the political elite to a certain perspective and course of action, it is also meant to engender popular consent and will, in turn, inevitably mobilize some of them for more direct participation. Once the wheels are set in motion it is increasingly beyond the control of the political powers to contain it.

At this point, Pandora's Box of sectarianism is wide open. Sectarianism is now a politically expedient mobilizer and explanatory variable for the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Bahrain. But it does not only account for the internal dynamic of these countries – sectarianism is also said to explain the actions and behavior of regional powers involved, in various ways, in the conflict inside the aforementioned countries.

What next?

The idea of the Persian Gulf as a region in its own right is well established, but the idea that it has or could have its own regional security framework is more an object of scorn perhaps than realism.²

In this regard some attention should be paid to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)³ as an endeavor undertaken under somewhat similar circumstances and with an equally implausible chance of coming into existence, let alone of succeeding. The act of creating the OSCE was a laborious process that took three years to finish (1972 to 1975). The final product encompassed a broad array of matters defined as within the purview of the organization, but the cornerstone was the “indivisibility of security”⁴ i.e., that the security aimed for would not be directed at any party. Today, we would phrase this in terms of a win-win situation: that security is not a zero-sum game and that it must be established at no one’s expense, rather to the benefit of all involved. From this also flows the prerequisite that all parties to the latent and potential conflicts are involved, otherwise the project loses its integrative function and immediately transforms those excluded into spoilers. The forming of the OSCE was a political act that both required overcoming the deep set West-East mistrust and building a common perception and conviction that détente is a continuous process with the corollary of coexistence rather than vanquishing the enemy. The three security dimensions of the OSCE process are political-military, economic and environmental, and finally human (democracy and human rights).

In so many ways this is reminiscent of the situation in the Gulf. There are perceptions of existential threats, hegemonic aspirations (and here Iran is not the only one feared by some of its neighbors: Saudi Arabia is also viewed by some fellow GCC members as prone to hegemonic aspirations) and security is primarily defined in military terms (deterrence etc.). As Gregory Gause and Michael Barnett point out, in many ways the GCC has been an organization going backward, not managing

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to engender or build a security community but instead warding off the possibility of one. In their words: “...while Gulf leaders constructed the GCC for statist purposes, its very existence has encouraged, however unintentionally, greater mutual identification at the societal level.” Recent developments with the intervention in Bahrain and a push toward greater security integration have not really brought the organization as such any closer to becoming a security community proper.

The real security community of the Persian Gulf cannot be built without or in spite of Iran and Iraq. Their inclusion is necessary not simply from a balance-of-power perspective but because the security that needs to be built cannot be built against any actor. Nor can this framework succeed without the participation of outside global powers especially the United States. Here the beginning of a détente between Iran and the United States, no matter how cautious, is crucial. And for a security community to survive Saudi Arabia must be brought on board, not to tolerate but to participate.

In its first incarnation this security framework will only amount to what Barry Buzan has called a “thin” international society, i.e., one where there are hardly any shared values and the focus is on devising rules for coexistence. This coexistence must however be of an active kind, i.e., more than just tolerating each other. While this may sound far-fetched, the number of issues and areas where there could be genuine cooperation as part of a broadened conception of security are plenty. Besides the obvious need to establish better communications on the political level, there are other issues: the day-to-day operations of military and maritime security, environmental issues (water), as well as a dialogue on human rights – something probably not welcomed by any party in this community to be.

While it is naive to suggest that this kind of common security framework can come into being simply because it is rational (is it really? for who?) it would be equally erroneous to suggest that the fact that it has not yet transpired as proof for why it never will and that the countervailing forces are constant. The OSCE was perhaps not a resounding success in preventing all conflicts but it was instrumental in creating a dialogue on many levels and fronts that helped keep the process of détente and state socialization alive during and beyond the last decades of the Cold War. While the states in the Persian Gulf, pace Barnett and Gause, may seem even more obdurate than their Cold War equivalents, their societies are much more dynamic and may show the way. Perhaps the Gulf version of the OSCE will grow from below?

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Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament

By Stéphane Lacroix, Sciences Po


A few days after the July 2013 coup that overthrew Egyptian President and Muslim Brotherhood figure Mohamed Morsi, Saudi Arabia was one of three Gulf countries to announce the provision of billions of dollars in financial aid to Egypt, thus openly marking its support for the new regime in Cairo. In fact, there are even indications that Saudi officials had been in touch with Egyptian officers and some anti-Brotherhood Egyptian businessmen weeks before the coup, and that they had made it clear that they would welcome Morsi’s ouster.

In some ways, this was a surprising development. Contrary to the United Arab Emirates, where officials had been outspoken in their opposition to the Brotherhood since 2011, the Saudi government had generally – at least in public, except on one occasion discussed below – avoided explicit attacks on the Brothers. How can this position be understood? My contention here is that the Muslim Brotherhood has been treated by the Saudi regime as simultaneously a domestic and a regional security issue, and that those two dimensions have fed on each other.

The relationship between the kingdom and the Muslim Brotherhood started in the 1950s, when Saudi Arabia gave shelter to thousands of Brotherhood activists from Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere. This happened in the context of the Arab cold war, which prompted an alliance between the two major opponents of Arab nationalism: the regional one – Saudi Arabia, and the domestic one – the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result of its massive presence in Saudi Arabia, the Brotherhood became entrenched both in Saudi society and in the Saudi state. This Muslim Brotherhood influence led to the politicization of Saudi Islam, and the emergence of a Saudi Islamist movement known as the Sahwa. Though the Sahwa groups (jamaat) bore varying degrees of Muslim Brotherhood influence, with the Sururis adopting a much more Salafi outlook, one of the jamaat, known as “the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood” (al-ikhwan al-muslimun al-saudiyyun), went so far as to claim the same name – though it presumably functioned independently from the mother organization and its members did not pledge allegiance to the general guide in Cairo.¹

The relationship between the exiled Brothers and the Sahwa movement, on the one hand, and the Saudi state, on the other hand, remained close for at least three decades. Yet, the Gulf war created the first major strain. Several Brotherhood branches openly criticized the U.S. military intervention called for by King Fahd, while the Sahwa launched its own domestic intifada to demand radical political reforms. By 1994 to 1995, the regime had crushed the Sahwa’s intifada, but what remained was a deep resentment toward the Brotherhood, which it held responsible for this unprecedented episode of dissent. In a clear sign that the government saw a direct link between the Brothers and the Sahwa, several prominent exiled Muslim Brotherhood (or Muslim Brotherhood-linked, even if not formally members) figures were expelled from the kingdom, such as Sayyid Qutb’s brother Muhammad, who taught at Umm al-Qura university. Some measures were also taken to curb the influence of the jamaat. In 2002, in a rare display of anger against the organization, Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, then minister of interior, openly accused the Muslim Brotherhood of being the “source of all evil in the Kingdom.”²

The next few years witnessed some form of normalization in the relationship. The Sahwa was reintegrated to the Saudi religious and social spheres, in exchange for which Sahwa leaders avoided all criticism of the government. This was not only the result of a more accommodating

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² Ibid.
stance on the part of the government; after the death of the most respected figures of the official religious establishment, Sheikhs Ibn Baz and Ibn Uthaymin, the royal family counted on the Sahwa to act as an alternative religious establishment, which could at least produce legitimacy by default. The royal family’s relationship to the Muslim Brotherhood outside the kingdom simultaneously improved, and contacts that had been suspended were re-established.³

With the start of the Arab Spring, the Sahwa was tempted to seize the opportunity and make a political stand. Several petitions were published in late February 2011: “Towards a state of rights and institutions,” signed by tens of Sahwa figures including Salman al-Awda; and “A call for reform,” signed by Nasir al-Umar and an array of Sahwa clerics. Al-Awda, in particular, has remained critical of the regime ever since, for instance publishing an open letter to King Abdullah in March 2013. It is true that none of those Sahwa leaders supported the call for demonstrations in Riyadh on March 11, 2011, the so-called “day of anger” (which never materialized). Yet, in the meantime, Abdullah had announced an aid package of tens of billions of dollars, some of which was reserved for religious institutions. Despite this, by appearing to back – at least in word – a movement of change that was gaining the whole region, the Sahwa had reawakened the fears of the regime. Thus, when Islamist governments came to power throughout the region, the Saudi regime’s main worry was that its own Islamists would feel emboldened. The situation in Egypt was especially unsettling for the Saudi regime: As the biggest Arab country and one that has close human and economic ties to Saudi Arabia, it has the largest potential to influence developments in the kingdom.

Being well aware of the necessity to appease the kingdom’s fears and to obtain Saudi Arabia’s support for the Egyptian economy, Morsi chose Saudi Arabia for his first official visit – a very strong symbol. This, however, wasn’t enough to ease Saudi Arabia’s distrust of the Brothers. Morsi’s apparent willingness to build a “constructive relationship” with Iran – he went to Tehran in August 2012, the first visit of an Egyptian president since Anwar Sadat, and invited Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Cairo – certainly made things worse. In royal family circles, many were convinced, it seems, that if the Muslim Brotherhood had to choose between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it would choose Iran.⁴ All of this led to Saudi Arabia’s support for the coup in Egypt.

This put the royal family in a difficult position at home. During the summer, all the major Sahwa figures signed petitions and statements denouncing the coup, and – in more or less explicit terms – the Saudi government’s support for it. And while some, like Nasir al-Umar, stuck to pure religious rhetoric, arguing that it is “forbidden to rebel against a Muslim ruler” and that what happens in Egypt is “a struggle between the Islamic project and the westernizing project opposed to Islam,” others framed their arguments in more or less explicit terms as a defense of electoral democracy. On August 8, 2013, for instance, 56 sheikhs, some of them known to be close to the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood, condemned the “removal of a legitimately elected president” and a violation of “the will of the people.”⁵ They added: “We express our opposition and surprise at the path taken by some countries who have given recognition to the coup … thereby taking part in committing a sin and an aggression forbidden by the laws of Islam – and there will be negative consequences for everyone if Egypt enters a state of chaos and civil war.” On Twitter, in the wake of the August 14, 2013 massacre in Cairo, thousands of Saudis replaced their pictures with the Rabaa sign in solidarity with the Brothers.

This, it seems, was seen by the Saudi regime as a confirmation of its fears. The response was drastic: On the one hand, the government decided to increase its support

³ Muhammad Qutb, who had been living in Qatar, was allowed to come back.

⁴ As one Saudi intellectual put it to me in a conversation, “the regime sees them as Islamists before being Sunnis.”

⁵ Some of the same sheikhs, along with Sururi figures, issued another statement on 13 January 13, 2014 criticizing in very harsh terms Egypt’s largest Salafi party, Hizb al-Nur, which supported the army’s “coup” against Morsi and by doing so “harmed the interests of Islam and Muslims, in Egypt and outside” (Bayan hawla al-mawaqif al-siyasiyya li-Hizb al-Nur, http://www.almoslim.net/node/198580?page=1).
for the new Egyptian government, providing it with a few extra billion dollars; on the other hand, it launched a new campaign to weaken the Sahwa at home. According to certain sources, a countrywide plan aimed at ridding Saudi universities from “Muslim Brothers” (however this may be understood) was designed.6 For the first time, all Muslim Brotherhood books were banned at the Riyadh book fair.7

But the more drastic measure came on February 4 when a royal decree announced that, from now on, “belonging to intellectual or religious trends or groups that are extremist or categorized as terrorist at the local, regional or international level, as well supporting them, or showing sympathy for their ideas and methods in whichever way, or expressing support for them through whichever means, or offering them financial or moral support, or inciting others to do any of this or promoting any such actions in word or writing” will be punished by a prison sentence “of no less than three years and no more than twenty years.” This decree has several important consequences. First, it endorses the Egyptian designation of the “Muslim Brotherhood” as a terrorist movement. Second, it forbids expressing any form of mere sympathy for the Brothers. Third, it is meant as an impending threat toward the Sahwa and all the groups that are part of it (obviously, the “Saudi Muslim Brotherhood,” but groups such as the Sururis could also theoretically be targeted). To increase the pressure, the Saudi ministry of interior made those points explicit in a March 7 statement, which contains a list of groups the kingdom deems “terrorist,” including the Muslim Brotherhood. Also considered “terrorist,” the statement adds, are “all groups that resemble those in the list, in ideology, word or action.”

All of this also had consequences on Saudi Arabia’s relationship with Qatar, which is seen by the kingdom as the Brotherhood’s regional patron. Although the two countries had not been on good terms since the late 1990s, and even less since the start of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia’s March 5 decision to withdraw its ambassador to Qatar in conjunction with Bahrain and the UAE – in protest for Qatar’s refusal to stop backing the Brothers – is an incredibly strong step.

This indicates a clear escalation on part of the Saudi regime against both the Brothers and the kingdom’s Islamists, the Sahwa movement, and shows the extent to which Riyadh has been considering the two issues as inseparable. There remains one core issue on which the regime, the Sahwa, and the Brothers tend to broadly agree: Syria. Yet, if there is some truth in recent reports of a Saudi willingness to adopt a more “cautious” strategy in Syria, this would mark the end of the last field of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and those Islamist movements, and a radical shift in Saudi Arabia’s political strategy – the consequences of which, regionally and domestically, are yet to be seen.

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The Gulf states and the Muslim Brotherhood

By Guido Steinberg, German Institute for International and Security Affairs

In July 2013, the Egyptian military under the leadership of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi toppled the government of President Mohamed Morsi, the first Muslim Brother who was elected head of state in the Middle East. When the new rulers subsequently cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), arresting its leadership, outlawing the organization, and declaring it a terrorist organization, many observers regarded this as a decisive defeat from which the Brotherhood would not recover. Not only had the old regime reinstated itself and decided to destroy the organization root and branch. But it had also been supported by a powerful coalition of Gulf states comprising: Saudi Arabia as the old and new conservative lead country of the Arab world, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as the financial powerhouse of the Arabian peninsula, and Kuwait as the latest convert to the anti-MB front in the Gulf. Looking at the sequence of events, it is very likely that Saudi Arabia and the UAE had been consulted in advance of the coup in order to secure their support after the crackdown. And in fact, the Gulf states promised and delivered billions in aid for the military rulers in the coming months, effectively showing how important the defeat of the MB had been to them.

The conflict between the MB and its enemies has not ended yet and is rather likely to shape the history of the region for the coming years, if not decades. In spite of the repressive capabilities of the Egyptian and other authoritarian states and the financial and political support by the rich Gulf states, the Brothers remain the only organized alternative to the old regimes, and North African and Middle Eastern populations are not likely to submit to a new and even more repressive form of authoritarian rule in the way they did until 2011. First, the military rulers will be confronted with growing economic problems in Egypt, which are too big to be solved only by the infusion of cash from the Gulf states. Furthermore, the powerful example of Tunisia remains, where the Ennahda party as the local branch of the MB remains part of a political system, which has managed to avoid the return to authoritarian rule and has the greatest chances of all the transformation states to become a success story. Second, the Gulf states will not be able to fund the Egyptian government on the current scale forever. Threatened with the impact of the U.S. shale revolution and possibly growing exports of oil and gas from Iraq and Iran (not to speak of an expected slowdown of economic growth in Asia), Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait will sooner or later be confronted with tighter budgets and will have to redefine their priorities. Thirdly, although the MB as an organization is weak in the Gulf states, its thinking has spread in all the Gulf states in the past decades and has influenced generations of students, the result being the emergence of powerful movements like the Sahwa al-Islamiya (Islamic Awakening), combining politicized and sometimes revolutionary MB thought with Wahhabi social and cultural conservatism. Therefore, even a continued crackdown in the UAE and Saudi Arabia (where the group is less pronounced anyhow) will not end in an eradication of the movement; the more so because the MB has retained a powerful supporter in Qatar – which has not altered its policies after the change in government in June 2013 – and has a long tradition in Kuwait, where it will remain active notwithstanding a more hostile attitude of the government in recent years. Instead, conflicts between the Gulf states over their respective policies concerning the MB are likely to continue, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE not being able to reign in Qatar.

The threat perception

The Gulf states’ policies toward the MB are shaped by a profound belief that the organization might pose a threat to their very survival. This is somewhat surprising, given that Saudi Arabia and its neighbors gave refuge to thousands of Muslim Brothers, when they escaped repression in their Egyptian, Syrian, and Iraqi home countries between the 1950s and 1970s and were employed
in the emerging educational systems in the Gulf. Relations deteriorated when prominent members of MB-affiliated organizations like the Sudanese Hasan al-Turabi, the Turk Necmettin Erbakan, and the Afghan Gulbuddin Hekmatyar supported President Saddam Hussein after Iraqi troops had occupied Kuwait in 1990. After 2001, the Saudi Interior Minister Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud (d. 2012) even attributed responsibility to the MB for the emergence of international Islamist terrorism. Nevertheless, most observers took Prince Nayef’s remarks as the personal view of the leading Saudi representative of an authoritarian security state rather than as a policy statement of the whole government.

How deep Saudi animosity toward the MB went only became clear after the organization won elections in Tunisia and Egypt and became an important player in Libya and in the Syrian opposition. It became obvious that the Gulf states (with the exception of Qatar) regard the MB as a strategic threat because they fear that it might export the successful revolutions in North Africa to the monarchies of the Gulf countries, where the Brothers have a presence in all states. Secondly, Saudi Arabia sees Brotherhood ideology as a school of thought competing for allegiance among the Gulf populations and challenging the religious legitimacy of the Saudi state, which is based on the ruling family’s alliance with the Wahhabi reform movement.

The future of the Muslim Brotherhood in the transformation states

The fear of the Gulf states might at first sight seem somewhat paranoid, as only Kuwait has a major organized Brotherhood presence. In Bahrain, where the Brotherhood is represented in parliament, it supports the regime in its struggle with the Shiite opposition. In Saudi Arabia, the MB is prohibited, in Qatar it dissolved itself 15 years ago, and in the UAE it has suffered a crackdown that has effectively ended its activities in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

The Saudi, Emirati, and Kuwaiti view becomes more understandable, though, when taking into account historical experience. In the 1950s and 1960s, Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt challenged the Gulf monarchies by propagating Arab nationalism and socialism as a powerful alternative to the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. Partly as a result of the spread of nationalist ideas, the monarchies in Iraq (1958), Yemen (1962), and Libya (1969) were toppled by nationalist officers and in Saudi Arabia a coup was foiled in 1969. Furthermore, Egypt’s aggressive regional policies led to the “Arab Cold War,” as coined by Malcolm Kerr, of the 1960s, which was fought out in Yemen, where Cairo and Riyadh supported the two conflicting camps. The Gulf states today fear a repetition of the crisis of 1960s under Islamist auspices. In their view, a revolutionary, republican, and transnational movement like the MB would use its power to try to topple the remaining monarchies in the region.

Now that the rise of the MB has been stopped in Egypt and Tunisia, it remains unclear where the organization is heading. Although Egypt has decided to destroy the MB, it remains to be seen whether the state will be able to stop its clandestine activities. In a worst-case scenario, the MB might even decide to return to violence – something the regime wants to make the world believe has already happened. Furthermore, enhanced repression might provide the Brotherhood with new support in the future. On the other hand, the case of Syria shows what happens if the authoritarian regime in question is hostile to the Gulf states and the MB is not considered a partner by them. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have invested heavily in weakening the position of the MB in the Syrian opposition. The net result has been that the MB has lost influence among the insurgents and it has become next to impossible to create a central command, with Salafist and jihadist groups increasingly dominating the fighting. By fighting the MB, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have weakened the only viable alternative to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syrian, and have allowed for much more dubious forces to gain ground. Without a strong MB, any regime change in Syria will only create chaos.

Differing approaches

The Gulf states’ policies regarding the MB also suffer from a lack of coherence, because Qatar is not ready to follow
the Saudi and UAE lead on the matter. Qatar’s political and financial support for the MB both domestically and regionally have made coordination within the GCC impossible. As Qatar shows no signs that it is ready to change its attitude, containing the MB will prove to be a difficult task for Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Just like Saudi Arabia, Qatar has hosted numerous Muslim Brothers fleeing the repression in their home countries since the 1960s. But in contrast to Saudi Arabia, it has allowed the Egyptian Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi (born 1926), who remains the MB’s supreme religious authority, to spread his worldview in Qatar and abroad. With the help of Al Jazeera TV channel, Qaradawi established himself as the most popular religious scholar in the Arab world and has promoted the cause of the Brotherhood worldwide. Furthermore, by fall 2011, the Qatari leadership seemed to have made the strategic decision to support the MB as the coming power in North Africa and the Levant. It not only used its soft power to promote the aims of the MB, but also assisted the Libyan revolutionaries by sending a token force and supporting Islamist insurgents with money, weapons, and training. Qatar does the same in Syria, where it closely cooperates with Turkey in its support for the insurgents – especially the Islamists and Salafists among them. Additionally, it built strong relations to the Islamist governments in Tunisia and Egypt, clearly looking for new allies in the Arab world.

This policy differed strongly from Saudi Arabia’s approach, which supported the Egyptian military leadership. It long hesitated to help the insurgents in Syria, where the local Muslim Brotherhood dominated the political opposition. Diplomatically, Saudi Arabia tried to break the preeminence of Qatar’s supporters in the Syrian National Coalition in late 2012 and early 2013, triggering a bitter power struggle between the different factions and personalities in this institution. These events were rightly interpreted as part of a Saudi-Qatari struggle for supremacy, which at first did not lead to any open conflict between the two. This is most likely due to that both governments – Saudi Arabia more than Qatar – act out of a fear of Iranian hegemony in the Middle East and the Gulf and therefore share the goal of toppling the Assad regime. But in March, the situation changed, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait withdrew their ambassadors from Doha, in a move designed to force Qatar to change its policies with regard to the MB. It remains to be seen how the new Qatari emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, will react, but it is unlikely that he will bow to the immense pressure of his neighbors.

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Qatar, the Ikhwan, and transnational relations in the Gulf

By David Roberts, Kings College London

Qatar has often found itself at the heart of intra-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) disputes. From the early 1990s to 2008 Qatar was involved in a cold war with Saudi Arabia, while its Bahraini bilateral relations have been fractious for more than a century. More recently Qatar’s relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have ebbed and flowed, while Saudi Arabia’s leadership is becoming, once again, increasingly irritated with Qatar. The latest iteration of these regional difficulties was crystalized when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain took the unprecedented step of withdrawing their ambassadors from Qatar en masse in early March.¹

The roots of the difficulties are clear: Qatar’s evident preference for channeling its support through and therefore bolstering the Ikhwan (the Muslim Brotherhood). Given how increasingly difficult and costly this policy is becoming for Qatar with its regional relations, it is worth re-examining existing understandings as to why Qatar supports the Ikhwan. Subsequently, recent bilateral issues will be examined to draw conclusions to inform a cost benefit analysis of Qatar’s continuing Ikhwan-supporting policies.

Qatar and the Ikhwan: The roots

Understanding Qatar’s links to the Ikhwan typically relies on quasi-academic, short articles in lieu of any notable academic sources. While many articles note that, for example, Yusuf al-Qaradawi – arguably the Ikhwan’s most prominent cleric – left Egypt for Qatar in the early 1960s, few note the scale of the influx of Ikhwan (or Ikhwan associated) scholars to Qatar around that time.²

Abdul-Badi Saqr arrived in 1954 from Egypt to be the director of education and subsequently run the Qatar National Library after being recommended by a prominent Cairo-based religious sheikh.³ Under his leadership an influx of Ikhwan teachers “stamped the education system with their Islamic ideology.”⁴ When Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani (r.1972-1995) took charge of the education portfolio in 1956 to 1957 he was concerned about increasing Ikhwan domination of education so he sacked Saqr and replaced him with the Arab nationalist Syrian Abdulrahman al-Samrah. However, he didn’t last more than a year thanks to the pressures of the British resident keen to evict such an ardent pan-Arabist. Even while trying to avoid the domination of Ikhwan or pan-Arab thinkers, Khalifa still oversaw significant recruitment from Cairo. In 1960 the head of Islamic sciences at the education department, Abdullah bin Tukri al-Subai, went to Al-Azhar to recruit teachers and thinkers. Ahmed al-Assal arrived in Qatar in 1960 and taught in schools, lectured in mosques, and helped form Ikhwan groups. Abdel-Moaz al-Sattar – Hassan al-Banna’s personal emissary to Palestine in 1946 – went to Qatar to be a school inspector and then director of Islamic Sciences at the ministry of education and co-authored numerous textbooks for the nascent Qatari school system in the early 1960s. Kemal Naji took on various roles including the director of education from 1964 to 1979, the head of the publication committee, and was also the foreign cultural relations advisor of the ministry of education. Qaradawi left Egypt for Qatar in 1961. Initially he ran a revamped religious institute and subsequently established and became dean of the College of Shari’a at Qatar University. Today he is widely considered to be one of the most influential and well-known Ikhwan intellectuals; a facet helped since the mid-1990s by his popular talk show “Sharia and Life” broadcast on Al Jazeera, which afforded him a large pan-regional audience.

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¹ Simeon Kerr, “Diplomatic Crisis as Gulf States Withdraw Ambassadors from Qatar,” Financial Times March 5, 2014.


⁴ Ibid.
Despite the prevalence of Ikhwan or at least Ikhwan sympathetic thinkers throughout Qatar’s various bureaucracies – but particularly its education system – few would suggest that today’s policies are a result of domestic pressure from Qataris inculcated into an Ikhwan ideology. The lack of apparent transference of Ikhwan ideology stems from a variety of factors.

Qatar is a country where the Wahhabi creed of Salafi, Hanbali Islam prevails. Qatar’s ruling family hails from the same central Arabian tribal group (the Bani Tamim) as Wahhabism’s founder, Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab and Qatar’s leaders have long adhered to its scriptures. Even in the 21st century when nothing about Qatar’s orientation or policies chimes with a typical understanding of the puritanical Wahhabi creed, the national mosque opened in 2012 was named after al-Wahhab himself. Though the state overall was receptive to the influx of the Ikhwan, the ground for proselytization was not so accepting.

Indeed, the Ikhwan is “barely [actively] involved in Qatari domestic affairs.” In distinct comparison to Saudi Arabia, Qatar has limited the institutional opportunities available for religious scholars of any description to exert influence domestically. Religious schools as founded by Qaradawi in 1961 remain niche and in 2008 to 2009 only taught 257 students, the vast majority of whom were not Qatari. Institutionally not entertaining the notion of religious influence on politics, there is no office of Grand Mufti in Qatar and the ministry for Islamic affairs and endowments was only established in 1993.

The Ikhwan’s lack of penetration in Qatar is also explained by its inability to perform a variety of its usual social functions. Running local sports clubs or operating food banks – typical Ikhwan activities elsewhere in the region – are popular but inevitably undercut the state’s legitimacy. In 1972 when Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani took over seamlessly from Ahmed bin Ali al-Thani, he augmented his wider legitimacy and diversified his support from nigh on exclusively based on the al-Thani to a far wider base. He did this through a budget splurge creating jobs, building houses, augmenting pensions, and increasing wages.

The Ikhwan, therefore, though having little discernable direct effect on policy in Qatar was an important part of the background makeup of the state. The two entities came to develop a mutually beneficial relationship so long as the Ikhwan in Qatar were, inevitably, outward facing. It is no surprise that the Ikhwan soon began to use Qatar as “a launching pad for its expansion into the Emirates and especially Dubai” from the early 1960s. The Ikhwan search for an outward focus found real traction with the influential Al Jazeera platform afforded to Qaradawi from 1996 onward and is personified in the official closure of the Ikhwan branch in Qatar in 1999.

Utility of Ikhwan links for Qatar

In the 1950s, 1960s, and subsequently there have clearly been those in the Qatari elite who have been motivated to a degree by a religiously-inspired agenda. This in and of itself is a motivating factor explaining the push for the influx of Islamic scholars to Qatar alongside the prosaic need to staff emerging bureaucracies with educated functionaries. The same impulses explain Saudi Arabia’s reliance on Ikhwan teachers and professionals from the

11 Tarek Al Mubarak and Amr Al Turabi, “Al Masar Al Mukhtalifah Fee Al Khaleej [Different Paths in the Gulf],” As Sharq Al-Awsat (6/11/2013)
1960s. Equally, for some in Qatar there may have been wider motivating factors, some of which prevail to this day.

Qatar’s status as a Wahhabi country was firmly established by the modern-day founder of the state, Sheikh Jassim. As such this was an inviolable plinth of the state’s makeup. Yet it was not one that could be actively used to augment legitimacy or to promote Qatar as a state for Wahhabism that is indelibly linked to Saudi Arabia. To augment the status of Wahhabism in Qatar, to explicitly instil it through education systems in schools or to give its religious scholars an official place in government, would have been to intractably instil the necessary deference of Qatar to Saudi Arabia as the custodian of the two holy places and the al-Wahhab legacy.

Instead, supporting the Ikhwan allowed a different group to develop Qatar’s systems. This avoided a reliance on Saudi-scholars or jurists to design and staff Qatar’s systems in a Wahhabi image inevitably tilting toward Riyadh. Also, Qatar’s leadership was in a stronger position and could set and enforce guidelines as to the group’s limitations to a greater degree.

Otherwise, this hosting of Ikhwan scholars allowed Qatar to augment its regional status with Ikhwan ideology being more widespread than Wahhabi thought. This allowed Qatar to fashion for itself a place as a key spoke in the Ikhwan wheel. Ikhwan members that Qatar attracted over the years with its “open door” policy were to prove useful in the Arab Spring.

Recent problems: A changing calculation?

For the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Ikhwan is – today – anathema. It has not been forgiven for supporting Iraq President Saddam Hussein in 1990, is blamed for radicalizing Saudi youth, and is something of a threat as a large, well organized religiously-driven group.

The UAE too harbors deep suspicions about the Ikhwan and has consequently taken a hard line and sentenced dozens of Ikhwan to jail sentences. For the UAE’s de facto leader, Muhammad bin Zayed, the Ikhwan is an issue of abiding importance; indeed leaked U.S. diplomatic cables give an unvarnished, personal view of his steadfast concerns about the group’s activities in the UAE. That the Ikhwan profited from the Arab Spring, gained power, and proved that they can effectively mobilize tens of thousands of citizens could only augment Zayed’s suspicions and concern.

There have been numerous spats involving Qaradawi in recent years, but recently there has been an escalation. On January 31, in a Friday sermon broadcast as usual by Qatar television, Qaradawi criticized the UAE describing it as “against Islam.” Amid a furor on social media, the UAE’s foreign ministry summoned the Qatari ambassador to account for why his ministry had not denounced Qaradawi’s comments though Zayed subsequently insisted that relations were fundamentally sound nevertheless. Qaradawi did not give a sermon on the next two Fridays, leading to speculation that he had been censored by the Qatari government or even stripped of his nationality. However, his absence was due to illness and he returned on February 21 to once more criticize the UAE, albeit in a more conciliatory manner, drawing on the predictable Emirati editorials bemoaning Qatar’s inability to muzzle Qaradawi.

Qaradawi also irked Saudi officials at the end of January, when he accused them of supporting Defense Minister Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi et al in Egypt who were “far from God and Islam.” Contemporaneously, accounts of Qatar’s support of Houthi rebels against Saudi Arabia’s interests are reportedly the last straw for Saudi’s leadership,

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13 Ondrej Beranek, “Divided We Survive: A Landscape of Fragmentation in Saudi Arabia,” in Middle East Brief (Brandeis University January 2009).
“Strong Words in Private from Mbz at Idex,” Wikileaks (February 25, 2009)
16 Haj Salmeen Ibrahim, “’Al Qaradawi’ Yaawd Li-Minbr Al Jmaaah Mntqadah Askar Misr Wa Al-Imarat [’Qaradawi’ Back to the Pulpit on Friday, Criticising the Egyptian Military and the UAE],” Al Quds Al Arabi (February 21, 2014)
17 Aisha Al Marri, “Tyraan Sadyaqah Min Qatr [Friendly Fire from Doha],” Al Ittihad (2/24/2014)
18 Amena Bakr, “Influential Cleric Urges Saudis to Stop Backing Egypt’s Dominant Military,” Reuters (January 28, 2014)
increasingly angry over a litany of other issues, to the extent that according to Al Arab, Saudi Arabia was considering closing the Qatari-Saudi land border, Saudi airspace to Qatar, and scuppering the imminent Qatar Airways deal to operate flights in the kingdom. Scurrilous social media exchanges also indicated the possible excommunication of Qatar from the GCC.

Mediation by the emir of Kuwait has reportedly calmed the situation and this is not the first time in recent years that Qatar has been publically rebuked: There was a February 2012 GCC meeting about Syria and Iran without Qatar because it “is considered unreliable when it comes to Iran.” However, that such threats are emerging to the public sphere is at least a cause for concern. While their implementation may be highly unlikely, Saudi Arabia has recent evidence of undertaking a surprising, complete reversal of policy directed by the king in the rejection of the U.N. Security Council seat in October 2013.

Conclusion

Qatar’s support of the Ikhwan is not as much of a preference as it may seem. It originated as the result of a structural necessity to staff positions without inculcating any systems that would automatically defer authority to Saudi Arabia. Equally it also continues to make Qatar an important spoke of the wider Ikhwan wheel, expanding its importance regionally. These networks played the central role in Qatar seeking to augment its influence during the Arab Spring. Though many of these gambles subsequently misfired, this strategy could be recycled at some stage in the future.

However, this entire policy thrust leaves neighboring countries uneasy. The Ikhwan’s importance has transcended from a potentially influential group to one with demonstrable capabilities in a revolutionary era. Qatar’s policies seem to underestimate the depth of antagonism they create. For Qatar, a country with a small native population where there has typically existed a strong ruler-ruled sociopolitical bargain, the Ikhwan has never posed any kind of threat. To the UAE, which is convinced it has found plotting Ikhwan elements with relatively poorer Emirates in its federation, the Ikhwan is seen as a genuine threat to its leadership. Similarly in Saudi Arabia, a country that had to employ an Arab Spring-inspired budget of $130 billion and continues to struggle with a slow burning insurgency in its critical eastern region, stoking or supporting Ikhwan actors is seen as a deeply grave concern.

The emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, cannot submit to regional pressure, for this would look weak, send the wrong signals as to Qatar’s status under his charge, and it would also be difficult to overturn his father’s policies. Yet some accommodation needs to be made. Tamim was the first leader to sign and ratify the GCC security pact, which likely contains draconian provisions related to the censure of speech and the extradition of citizens that Tamim himself would not propose, so he is willing to compromise.

In the current climate many of Qatar’s Ikhwan links have either been checkmated or otherwise degraded in utility. It would be beneficial, therefore, to keep these relations on a low profile. Qaradawi is virtually untouchable because he was so supported by Tamim’s father – a facet Zayed may well understand – and because any such move would be seen as a capitulation. But to show a willingness to tackle Gulf states’ concerns, Tamim could direct a clearing-house in Al Jazeera Arabic: the channel whose reputation has sunk lower across the Arab world as its clear support of the Ikhwan has grown. Restoring balance to Al Jazeera would not only show Qatar’s willingness to act, but could lead to the slow resuscitation of the channel’s credibility and as one of the key fonts of Qatari soft power this is a worthy goal.

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19 "Al A’lqat Al Saudiyah Al Qatariyah Mutazmah Jidawan Wa Al Harb Al Alamiyah Tshtaal Bayn Al Biladayn Qa Amir Al Kuwayt Ytwasat Lil-Thdah Qa Ttwyq Al Tawatr [Qatari-Saudi Relations in Crisis as a Media War Flares up between the Two Countries; the Emir of Kuwait Mediates to Calm Tensions]," Al Rai Al Yaum (November 22, 2013)

20 "Sabr Al Saudiyah Yunafth Wa Ijraat Mutwaqaah Dud Al Dawhah [Saudi Arabia’s Patience Is Running out and Action Is Expected against Doha]," Al Arab (February 19, 2014)

21 For example, follow the Twitter hashtag #的地位診断 to see the toing-and-froing of accusation and counter accusation.

22 Clemens Von Wergin, “Iran Schmuggelt Waffen Übers Meer an Die Hisbollah [Iran Smuggles Weapons across the Sea to Hezbollah],” Die Welt (February 15, 2012)
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"Al Alaqt Al Saudiyah Al Qatariyah Mutazmah Idan Wa Al Harb Al Alamiah Tshtalayn Bayn Al Biladayn Qa Amir Al Kuwayyt Ytwsat Lil-Thdah Qa Twyq Al Tawatr [Qatari-Saudi Relations in Crisis as a Media War Flares up between the Two Countries; the Emir of Kuwait Mediates to Calm Tensions]" Al Rai Al Yaum (November 22, 2013). http://www.raialyoum.com/?p=23993


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The roots and future of sectarianism in the Gulf

By Frederic M. Wehrey, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Too often, observers inside and outside the Gulf take at face value what is essentially a convenient, shorthand way for making sense of a multidimensional region. Certainly, the Shiite-Sunni split in Islam matters. But sectarian identity has frequently coexisted with, or been subsumed by, other affinities: national, regional, tribal, ethnic, class, generational, and urban versus rural. Often what seems to be a religious or doctrinal difference is more accurately a byproduct of political repression, provincial marginalization, or uneven access to economic resources. The local context matters enormously in this regard: Sectarian dynamics in Bahrain, for instance, are vastly different from those in Lebanon or Syria.

Analysis of religious differences can only take us so far in understanding the roots of sectarianism. To determine whether and how sectarianism will evolve into a real security threat we need to focus more on local institutional factors and the role of elites in invoking Shiite-Sunni identities. The regional environment – Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the Syria war – has certainly heightened sectarian tensions in the Gulf. So too has the proliferation of social media, which has lent a real time immediacy to regional conflicts. But these factors are ultimately enablers, rather than root causes. If institutions and political life in the Gulf were marked by greater inclusivity and pluralism, then sectarian identities would be less politicized and less malignant. Social media and regional conflicts would have less of a mobilizing effect on Gulf citizens. Finally, two key variables will shape and perhaps temper the future of Shiite-Sunni tensions in the Gulf: generational change – within royal families and Shiite opposition networks – and evolving splits within Sunni Islamism, specifically conflict between Brotherhood and Salafi currents.

The neglected importance of institutions and the agency of elites

Arab commentators and scholars have devoted extensive effort to diagnosing the roots of sectarianism, in the Gulf and across the region. Overwhelmingly these commentators and scholars assign agency to Iran’s nefarious meddling in Arab politics and society. Some voices cast the blame for the regional rise in sectarian temperature on “misguided” Salafi clerics and their prolific use of social media. Still others maintain that the Middle East’s sectarian split is essentially a U.S. project to divide and weaken the Islamic world. Opinion pieces in the U.S. press that forecast a redrawing of the regional map along ethnic and sectarian lines – predicting, for instance, the creation of a new state in eastern Saudi Arabia and an independent “Shiastan,” in southern Iraq – add grist to such suspicions.

What has been missing is a focus on the role of institutions and the agency of political elites in inflaming sectarian passions. A number of recent Western studies have begun to address these shortcomings, but there is still room for more sustained exploration.1 The dearth of inclusive, participatory structures; discrimination in key sectors like education, clerical establishments, and the security services; the absence of civil society; and uneven economic development are the real culprits of sectarianism. In particular, the rise in tensions is the result of the failure of reform promises that were made at the turn of the millennium that left a younger generation of Shiite youth deeply embittered and frustrated. Young activists tell me that being shut out of the social compact in the Gulf, deprived access to economic and political capital has instilled in them a sense of “otherness” – and made them susceptible to sectarian mobilization.

1 These include: Frederic Wehrey, Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings (Columbia University Press, 2013); Toby Matthieson, Sectarian Gulf: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the Arab Spring that Wasn’t (Stanford University Press, 2013); Lawrence Potter, ed., Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf (Hurst, 2014); Brigette Marchal, The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships: Doctrine, Transnationalism, Intellectuals and the Media (Hurst, 2012); Fanar Haddad, Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity, (Columbia/Hurst, 2011).
In tandem, at the height of the Iraq War, Gulf regimes, particularly Bahrain but also Saudi Arabia, increasingly viewed Shiite reform activity as a security threat. This strategy reached its apogee in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings, when Gulf media and Sunni clerics attempted to tar what were initially broad-based demands for democracy as narrowly Shiite in character and inspired by Iran. The net effect of this strategy was to create fissures within the reform movement by exacerbating Shiite-Sunni identities – a policy that implicitly highlighted the ruling families as arbiters over a fractious and divided citizenry.

**Saudi-Iranian rivalry: An enabler of sectarianism, but not the root**

With regard to the notion of a sectarian cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the rivalry is informed less by sectarianism and more by other factors. The two states embody radically different models of government – each laying claim to Islamic legitimacy – and two very different visions of regional order. Iran’s system has enshrined the role of religious authorities in political life and given people a partial say in governance through elections. The Saudi ruling family has effectively depoliticized its clerics and continues to abhor the principle of democratic elections. The question of U.S. power in the region is also at the heart of the struggle: Iran sees a Middle East free from U.S. military influence whereas Saudi Arabia historically has required some sort of external balancer to serve as a check against Iran – and Iraq. The two sides have also jostled for patronage of historically pan-Arab “portfolios” such as the Palestinian cause: the al-Saud see Iran’s involvement in this issue as tremendously threatening to its regional and even domestic legitimacy.

Iran has generally tried to downplay sectarianism in its media and the way it conceptualizes its involvement in the region. Saudi Arabia too has framed its policies of terms of Arab and pan-Islamic legitimacy. But regardless of intent, the meddling of the two powers in weak and fragmented states has ended up fueling a dangerous form of identity politics. The most expedient local partners for both sides are often those with a profoundly sectarian outlook.

That said, Saudi Arabia and Iran are capable of dialing back and tempering sectarianism. We saw this play out in Lebanon in the aftermath of the 2006 war. We are seeing it again now in Bahrain, where Iran (and Hezbollah) have lowered the tenor of their criticism of Saudi policies. If the bilateral rivalry were eased toward a more durable detente, it might enable the rise to power of more progressive factions within the royal establishments of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain who would have more leeway to enact reforms that would address Shiite grievances.

**Twitter wars: The distorting effect of social media**

The explosion of social media has amplified the salience of sectarian identities in the Gulf. This, too, is a recent development that helps explain the rise in sectarianism over the past 15 years. Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have created a vast echo chamber for sectarian strife to reverberate from one corner of the region to another. Social media is a real time, instantaneous theater where audiences do not just observe but participate in ongoing conflicts in the region. The most extreme, strident purveyors of sectarianism are given disproportionate weight on social media.

A good illustration of this is the episodic calls by fringe Shiite voices for secession, militancy, or greater support from Iran. Such plans, particularly the notion of new Shiite state encompassing eastern Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and southern Iraq, enjoy little support given the unique national histories of Shiites communities in each state, the religious and intellectual genealogies of their elites, and the power of familial and tribal bonds that militate against such a union. Ironically, if there is one force that could shift the map it is the Sunni side. For all their accusations that the Shiite are beholden to a foreign power, it has been Bahrain’s Sunni Islamists who have been most willing to sacrifice the tiny island’s sovereignty on the altar of sectarian solidarity. Since 2012, many of these Islamists have demonstrated for greater political and military union with Bahrain’s Sunni patron, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Gulf regimes have pursued a Janus-faced policy on policing
Visions of Gulf Security

this toxic media discourse. At one level, sectarianism in the media has a certain utility: It is a reminder of the indispensability of monarchy as the “glue” binds society together. Yet, Gulf regimes are also fearful of such vitriol getting out of control and fueling a dangerous strain of Salafi extremism that could escape their control. Already, there are signs of this happening.

Blowback from Syria

The “sectarianization” of the Syria conflict – due to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s policies and the intervention of outside actors like the Gulf Arab states and Iran – has rippled across the Gulf. The sectarian dimension of Salafi-jihadism’s appeal is well-established; it is evident in the flow of jihadists and money to Syria from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait and in the exhortations of anti-Shiite clerics urging support for Syria’s Salafi rebels. There is little danger that sectarian spillover from Syria will escalate into violent conflict across the Gulf. But Gulf funding and volunteers in the Syria conflict are creating new strains of al Qaeda-ism that could eventually threaten Gulf regimes and U.S. interests. Gulf rulers who wish to avoid tempting fate would do well to abandon the strategy of harnessing sectarianism for political gain and work toward genuine inclusion.

The demonization of the Alawite regime in Syria and its allies by Gulf Sunni clerics has had a blowback effect on local Shiites. Shiite reformists who at one time lauded the cooperation between Sunni activists elsewhere in the country now speak of these relations being frayed by mutual suspicion and distrust. Currently, we do not see the Shiites of the Gulf flocking to fight in Syria or providing funding to the same extent as Sunnis. How and why this is the case cannot be explained with reference to religious movements, doctrinal differences, or Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Instead, it highlights, once again, the importance of local histories, institutional frameworks, and personalities.

It also highlights Iran’s differentiated approach to Shiite dissent across the Arab world and lack of clandestine lethal involvement in Gulf affairs. Iran is not backing Gulf Shiite activity to the extent that its notorious Quds Force is supporting Shiite militants in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. There may be scattered and episodic contacts between activists and elements of the Iranian government or Hezbollah. As is the case elsewhere in the region, Iran may have sleeper cells waiting to strike the oil infrastructure of Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province or the U.S. Fifth Fleet. But by no stretch of the imagination does this imply that Iran is directing or orchestrating the post-2011 protests in the Gulf or that its support is crucial to their continuation.

Overwhelmingly, the Gulf Shiites remain focused on their local rights, within the framework of existing political processes. How long this will last in light of the current stalemate on reform in the Gulf remains to be seen. A recent thread from January 2014 on a web forum affiliated with mainstream al-Wefaq society in Bahrain offers a cautionary note. It begins with the question:

“Why have Bahrain’s takfiris left to aid al-Qaeda in Syria while Bahrain’s and the Gulf’s Shi’a have not gone to defend the Islamic holy sites in Syria?”

Subsequent posters reply that Bahrain’s Shiites do not have the military experience the Shiites in Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Lebanon have, and that the Shiites in those countries are sufficient to fulfill the duty. Others point to the numerous statements from Gulf Shiite clerics – from across the political and doctrinal spectrum – which have counseled against such adventurism. “Our authorities are bent on preventing bloodshed,” notes one reply.

U.S. and Western interests may eventually be threatened if Shiite opposition activity takes a more radical, extremist turn. Already, there are activists from the February 14 Youth Movement in Bahrain associating the U.S. Fifth Fleet with the al-Khalifa’s repression. Whether and how this nascent anti-Americanism devolves into a more serious threat depends on how the United States is perceived as a neutral broker. It may also hinge on generational shifts – both within the opposition’s ranks and within the royals’ ranks.
The future: Generational shifts and intra-Sunni tensions

Generational fissures within opposition movements are a further division that may militate against Shiite-Sunni conflict becoming the source of future instability in the Gulf. Many Shiite youth I spoke with, particularly in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, described themselves as post-ideological, post-sectarian and even post-clerical. They embraced Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as their marja precisely because they stayed out of their affairs. “Sistani is a secular marja [marja almani],” one of them quipped. On the regimes’ side, we may eventually see a similar generational impact on sectarianism: the rise to power of a younger generation of royals and even Sunni clerics for whom the Iranian Revolution is less of a formative memory and sectarian dogma has less usefulness.

Yet, these positive trends may be offset by the growing strength of Salafism and the new strain of sectarianism being bred by the Syria conflict. On this note, intra-Sunni fissures – namely, the Muslim Brotherhood versus Salafism – may eventually come to overshadow the Shiite-Sunni split in the Gulf. More than Shiism, the activist strand of Islamism promoted by the Brotherhood has a very real ability to threaten the Saudi-backed quietist current of Salafism using its own Sunni vocabulary, with a far greater mobilizing potential on a wider audience.

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Seeking to explain the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East: The case study of Iraq

By Toby Dodge, London School of Economics and Political Science

Introduction

It is clear that sectarian rhetoric both from above and below is now a dominant ideological trend across the Middle East. Sectarianism from above, the use of communalist language to further the interests of ruling elites, can be clearly identified in Saudi foreign policy, in the state sanctioned rhetoric of Qatari media outlets and preachers, and in the speeches of those who previously claimed to be working for anti-imperialist Arab unity in the Middle East.¹ To some extent, sectarianism from below, the popular use of aggressive and divisive communalist rhetoric can been seen as a direct response to this elite encouragement. However, it can also be read as the result of the growth of social media across the Middle East, democratizing communication that allows new, previously suppressed or marginal voices, to find a wider audience.

What is less clear is when it becomes possible to identify the start of this trend and how to judge its causes. Sectarian political mobilization could be dated to the start of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, if not to the signing of the National Pact in the summer of 1943. A later date would site the growing confidence in and funding for Saudi Arabian global Wahhabi proselytization in the 1970s and 1980s. This process moved into a defensive over-drive as

¹ Examples of this would be the increased use of sectarian rhetoric in the programming of Al Jazeera Arabic, the now infamous speeches given by Qatar based but Muslim Brotherhood aligned cleric, Yusuf al-Qaradawi in June 2013 and Hassan Nasrallah’s justification of Hezbollah’s fight to save the Assad regime in Syria in April and May 2013.
a reaction to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Gulf state’s financial support for Iraq’s war against Iran from 1980 to 1988.

However, Daniel Byman dates the start of the current wave of sectarian mobilization to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. For him, this unleashed “a massive sectarian wave” that “has grown in size and ferocity as Syria descended into strife.” The removal of the allegedly secular and coercively competent Baathist regime in Baghdad and Iraq’s descent into a bloody communal civil war certainly brought the sectarian justification for mass blood letting to the Gulf. However, the political system put in place under the U.S. occupation also institutionalized a rough and ready form of ethno-sectarian consociationalism. This consciously divided Iraq’s polity along religious and ethnic lines and encouraged politicians to seek votes on the basis of communalist identities.

This approach to identifying the origins of the current wave of sectarianism in the Middle East would see them in the aftermath of regime change in Baghdad, where a Shiite majority government, increasingly aligned to Iran, understood its relations with its own population and more recently, its relations with the wider Middle East, in terms of the religion of its ruling elite and the majority of its population. Against this background, the aftermath of the “Arab Spring,” with the descent of Syria into a civil war increasingly justified in sectarian terms and the use of sectarian rhetoric by the ruling elites of the Arab Gulf states, looks like an acceleration of trends already put in place by the aftermath of regime change in Baghdad.

With this in mind, can Iraq’s own descent into a civil war justified by sectarian rhetoric tell us anything about the causes of the increasing communalist politics across the rest of the Middle East? If it can, such an explanation would focus on the use of historical track dependencies by ethnic and religious entrepreneurs and the role that state weakness plays in their success.


### The Socio-cultural factors in Iraq’s descent into civil war

The socio-cultural factors that are most commonly deployed to explain the rise of ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq and then sectarian politics across the region more generally, focus on divisive sub-state identities. However, the power and relevance of these identities have not historically dominated Iraqi or wider Middle Eastern political discourse. As Fanar Haddad has argued, before 2003 “traditional Iraq discourse, whether from above or below, has struggled to openly address ‘sectarianism.’”

Yet as the post-2003 violence in Iraq mutated from an insurgency directed at the U.S. occupation to an all out civil war, the rhetoric used to justify the increasing killings of civilians, the population transfers, and mass casualty attacks became infused with sectarian language.

Sunnis and Shi’as began using new terms to refer to each other. To Shi’as, Sunnis were Wahhabis, Saddamists, and nawasib. To Sunnis, Shi’as were al rafidha or al turs. Rafidha, meaning ‘rejectionists,’ refers to those who do not recognize the Islamic caliphs and want instead a caliphate from the descendent of Imam Ali.4

Clearly, by 2006 the conflict was justified in aggressively divisive sectarian language.

Such forms of political mobilization based on religious and ethnic identity do not operate on a wholly rational, instrumental, or even fully conscious basis, as “the political genius of ethnicity in the contemporary developed world lies precisely in its ability to combine emotional sustenance with calculated strategy.”5 Haddad makes the distinction between three states of ethnic and religious identity: aggressive, passive, and banal.6 In times of insecurity, both material and ideational, competition for scarce resources and the aggressive assertion of competing identity claims


6 Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, p. 25.
are likely to move any group’s collective sense of itself from banal or passive to the violently assertive, as the group struggles for survival.

However, for these communalistic identities to triumph as an organizing principle in fluid and unpredictable situations, the existence of a certain type of sub-national political elite is required. These “ethnic and religious entrepreneurs” have to supply what a wider community needs, a degree of stability, ideational certainty, and political mobilization. They can then legitimize their role in terms of a communalistic identity that aids them in the struggle for popular support and political power. In circumstances of profound uncertainty, people will turn to whatever grouping, militia, or identity offers them the best chance of survival. This unstable and potentially violent process will certainly be shaped by historical path dependencies but needs the actions of political entrepreneurs to politicize and mobilize what have previously been passive, irrelevant, or non-political identity traits. In the hands of political entrepreneurs, local, sub-state, and ethnic identities will emerge from this process to provide channels for mobilization and the immediate basis for political organization.

However, once this process has been set in motion, when ethnic and sectarian entrepreneurs have mobilized a significant section of the population on the basis of communalistic identity, this dynamic can quickly solidify and is difficult to reverse. Previously “fuzzy” or passive identity traits can become politicized and “enumerated.” Survival, a degree of predictability for individuals and their families, or simply resource maximization becomes primarily obtainable through the increasingly militant deployment of ethnic or sectarian identity. It needs to be stressed that there is nothing inevitable about the unfolding of this process; the primary cause is the material and ideational insecurity faced by the population, the lack of institutionalized politics that guarantees citizenship, and equal access to state resources, not the existence of the historical path dependencies that are then mobilized by sectarian entrepreneurs.

In pre-2003 Iraq, the state promoted an Iraqi nationalism, which, at first glance, appeared to be without religious bias. Although, from the mid-1990s onward, President Saddam Hussein had injected Islamism into his party’s ruling ideology, examples of the state using blatantly sectarian rhetoric were comparatively rare. However, on closer inspection, the ruling ideology, based as it was on Arab nationalism, relied on a passive but nonetheless important affinity with Sunni Islam. As Haddad argues, although Baathist ideology in Iraq did attempt to integrate both Sunni and Shiite imagery, it was clearly more inclusive of Sunni symbolism than Shiite. In addition, it was Sunni Islam that was taught in state schools, and various aspects of Shiite religious practice were banned under the Baathist regime.

This favoring of Sunni symbolism and the suppression of Shiite Islam came to a shuddering halt when the Baathist regime fell in April 2003, freeing the majority Shiite population to actively promote their religious identity. Only a few weeks after the fall of the Baath Party, up to three million Shiite pilgrims descended on the holy city of Karbala to take part in the previously banned arba‘in ceremony. In 2003, Iraq was a country with little government, almost no state institutions, and no order. The Shiite religious hierarchy, the hawza, became the focus of institutionalized politics that guarantees citizenship, and ideational insecurity faced by the population, the lack of institutionalized politics that guarantees citizenship, and equal access to state resources, not the existence of the historical path dependencies that are then mobilized by sectarian entrepreneurs.

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7 See Rothchild, Ethnopolitics, p. 29.
12 Haddad, Sectarianism in Iraq, p. 33.
of loyalty and hope for the largest section of Iraqi society.\(^{15}\) Once governing institutions were tentatively set up, their senior ranks filled ethnic and religious entrepreneurs, the formerly exiled politicians and parties that actively asserted the centrality of their Shiite religious beliefs to the country’s new politics and the desire to remold Iraqi nationalism, placing Shiism at its heart. This assertive promotion of religious identity produced a predictable backlash across the Sunni section of Iraqi society and then from the Sunni ruling elites of neighboring states. In an increasingly lawless country politically dominated by overtly Shiite parties and the \textit{hawza}, those Sunnis who had previously found comfort and certainty in Iraqi nationalism began to look elsewhere. An increasingly militant assertion of a rival Sunni Islamism, supported by outside actors, was forged. In the face of persecution and then civil war, it rapidly radicalized and at its fringes turned increasingly violent.\(^{16}\)

A close examination of Iraq after 2003 would not stress the existence of historic track dependencies, existing but passive religious and ethnic identities. These were certainly present but needed to be manipulated, mobilized, and solidified. Instead, it is the existence of an active and ultimately successful group of ethnic and religious entrepreneurs that made sure sub-state sectarian political identities become the dominant form of political mobilization after 2003. This was certainly a case of sectarianism from above.

State capacity and sub-state identity

Socio-cultural explanations for the increasing use of sectarian and ethnic identities for political mobilization are directly linked to the power of the state’s institutions, its army and police force, but also its ability to deliver services to its population. The withdrawal or weakening of institutional power from society creates a vacuum for both ethnic entrepreneurs to mobilize within and the purveyors of violence, justified in sectarian language, to exploit lawlessness. This focus on state weakness to explain sectarian mobilization supports Fearon and Laitin’s argument that “financially, organizationally and politically weak central governments render insurgency more feasible and attractive due to weak local policing or inept and corrupt counterinsurgency practices.”\(^{17}\)

A coherent state relies on its ability to impose order on the population and to monopolize the deployment of collective violence across the whole of its territory.\(^{18}\) However, once a state has obtained the ability to impose and guarantee order, the basis of its sustainability and legitimacy moves to infrastructural power, delivering services the population benefits from as it operates across society unopposed.\(^{19}\) The degree to which a state has reached this ideal type can be judged firstly by the ability of its institutions to impose and guarantee the rule of law, then to penetrate society, mobilize the population, and finally regularly extract resources in the form of taxation.\(^{20}\) Ultimately, the stability of the state depends on the extent to which its actions are judged to be legitimate in the eyes of the majority of its citizens, and the ability of its ruling elite to foster consent.\(^{21}\)

The initial causes of the security vacuum in Iraq were twofold, the lack of troops the invading forces brought with them, followed by the disbanding of the Iraqi army. Faced with the widespread lawlessness that is common after violent regime change, the United States lacked the troop


\(^{17}\) Fearon and Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War” pp. 75–6.


numbers to control the situation. In February 2003, in the run-up to war, Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki called for “something in the order of several hundred thousand soldiers” to guarantee post-war order. James Dobbins, in a widely cited study on state building published in the run-up to the invasion, compared U.S. interventions in other states since the World War II. Dobbins concluded that occupying forces would need 20 security personnel, police, and troops per thousand people. Translated into American personnel, U.S. forces should have had between 400,000 and 500,000 soldiers to impose order on Iraq. In May 2003, the total strength of coalition forces numbered 173,000. This figured dropped to as low as 139,000 in 2004, and only significantly increased after President George W. Bush announced the “surge” at the start of 2007. Paul Bremer’s decision to disband the Iraqi army in May 2003, forced 400,000 armed, trained, and alienated ex-soldiers out onto the streets, facing unemployment. Of even greater significance, Bremer’s decision meant that the Iraqi armed forces had to be rebuilt from scratch, a process that by its very nature was bound to take several years. Thus, the violence that shook Iraq after 2003 was a direct result of the security vacuum created by the lack of troops to impose order.

The civilian institutional capacity of the state in 2003 was in a similarly perilous condition. Iraq had staggered through two wars from 1980 to 1990 and was then subjected to the harshest and longest-running international sanctions ever imposed. The sanctions regime was specifically designed to break the government’s ability to deliver services and, with the notable exception of the rationing system, it was effective. The civilian capacity of the state was dismantled by the looting that spread across Baghdad after the fall of the Baathist regime. This initial three weeks of violence and theft severely damaged the state’s administrative capacity: 17 of Baghdad’s 23 ministry buildings were completely gutted. Looters initially took portable items of value such as computers, before turning to furniture and fittings. They then systematically stripped the electric wiring from the walls to sell for scrap. This practice was so widespread that copper and aluminum prices in the neighboring states, Iran and Kuwait, dramatically dropped as a result of the massive illicit outflow of stolen scrap metal from Iraq.

Following the destruction of government infrastructure across the country, the de-Baathification pursued by the U.S. occupation purged the civil service of its top layer of management, making between 20,000 and 120,000 people unemployed and removing what was left of the state and its institutional memory. (The large variation in estimates indicates the paucity of reliable intelligence on the ramifications of such an important policy decision.) After 2003, not only did the state’s ability to impose order on Iraq disintegrate, but the coherence and capacity of its civil institutions also fell away. The population was bereft of order or state-delivered services.

Against this background of war, sanctions, inadequate occupying forces, and resultant looting, Iraq in 2003 became a collapsed state. As William Zartman has put it:


23 See ibid.


State collapse is a deeper phenomenon than mere rebellion, coup, or riot. It refers to a situation where the structure, authority (legitimate power), law, and political order have fallen apart and must be reconstituted in some form, old or new.\footnote{I. William Zartman, “Posing the Problem of State Collapse,” in I. William Zartman (ed.), \textit{Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority} (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1995), p. 1.}

In the aftermath of state failure, authoritative institutions, both societal and governmental, quickly lose their capacity and legitimacy.\footnote{Ibid., p. 6.} The geographic boundaries within which national politics and economics have been historically enacted simultaneously expand and contract. On one level, because the state has lost its administrative and coercive capacity, the country’s borders become increasingly meaningless. Decision-making power leaks out across the boundaries of the country to neighboring capitals – in Iraq’s case, Amman, Damascus, and Tehran, as well as Washington. As this process accelerates regional and international actors are drawn into the conflict, for good or ill. More damaging, however, is that power drains into what is left of society, away from the state capital, down to a local level, where limited organizational capacity begins to be rebuilt. The dynamics associated with state collapse mean that politics becomes simultaneously international and highly local.\footnote{Ibid., p. 5.} In the aftermath of state failure, individuals struggle to find public goods, services, and economic subsistence and physically survive any way they can, usually through ad hoc and informal channels:

When state authority crumbles, individuals not only lose the protection normally supplied by public offices, but are also freed from institutional restraints. In response, they often seek safety, profit or both. Their motives become more complex than when they could depend on the state.\footnote{Nelson Kasfir, ‘Domestic Anarchy, Security Dilemmas, and Violent Predation,’ in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), \textit{When States Fail: Causes and Consequences} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 55.}

This is exactly the situation that the Iraqi population found themselves in from 2003 onward. The state suddenly ceased functioning, leaving a security and institutional vacuum across Iraq. Iraqi society was initially overrun by opportunist criminals, then by the diffuse forces fighting in the insurgency, and finally by a full-blown civil war. It was the creation of this coercive and institutional vacuum that allowed ethnic and religious entrepreneurs to operate with such freedom and success. The Iraqi state, long the focus of political identity but also the provider of coercion and resources, ceased to exist. The Iraqi population was cut loose, both ideationally and materially, and had to find political, coercive, and economic leadership where it could. From 2003 to 2009, religious parties and militias became the major suppliers of these scarce resources. Individual Iraqi’s could only access these resources by deploying a sectarian identity.

A similar process is certainly playing out in Syria where protest and rebellion has triggered the retreat of the state. In the Gulf, with the exception of Yemen, state institutions remain coherent enough to place limits on the space in which ethnic and religious entrepreneurs can operate. State elites certainly deploy sectarian rhetoric but this continues to sit in an uneasy relationship with the language of citizenship and national equality.

Conclusions

If Iraq can be taken as a case study for the rise of sectarian politics across the wider Middle East then its lessons are fairly clear. First, the origins of sectarian politics in Iraq do not come from the historical track dependencies of the country’s religious and ethnic make up. For the majority of the country’s history, communalist politics have not been the main vehicle for political mobilization. From the 1920s to the 1980s Arab and then Iraqi nationalism dominated political rhetoric. The fact that Iraq had the largest Communist Party in the Middle East in the 1950s indicates that a fairly substantial section of a newly urbanized population was happy to take its class identity as the primary point of political reference. However, the dominance of sectarian identity politics after 2003 has two main causes. The first is quite simply state weakness.
In the aftermath of state collapse in 2003, ordinary urban Iraqis, the majority of the population, had to find security and certainty wherever they could. It was coercive entrepreneurs on a very local level who supplied this. In the absence of state delivered law and order, militias formed and solidified in reach and organization to deliver order to the population. This order and the accompanying resource extraction were certainly justified in terms of sectarian rhetoric. But the use of Shiite, Sunni, or Kurdish political labels to justify militia activity happened after that activity started not before. Sectarianism was used as a justification not as the primary motivation. This leads us on to the second cause of sectarian politics, the role of political entrepreneurs. In 2006, Phebe Marr’s research suggested that only 26.8 percent of Iraq’s new ruling elite were “insiders,” those who has stayed in the county under Baathist rule. It was thus the politicians, returning from many years of exile, who were primarily responsible for deploying sectarian rhetoric. They used this language to divided up the polity in ways that would maximize their votes and influence and minimize the accusation that, after long periods of absence, they did not represent their own constituencies.

The lessons of Iraq for the wider region are hence clear: sectarian politics is primarily driven by ruling elites and secondarily by state weakness. A reduction in sectarian politics is possible but it would mean the ruling elites of the region choosing to move away from heralding their population in sectarian forms to a new politics based on citizenship, a highly unlikely possibility.

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Explaining the spread of sectarian conflict:
Insights from comparative politics

By Fred H. Lawson, Mills College

Recent scholarship situated at the interstices of comparative politics and international relations explores a wide range of dynamics whereby sectarian conflicts spread from one country to another. The possibility that such conflicts exhibit diffusion or contagion is now well-established: Havard Hegre and Nicholas Sambanis demonstrate that civil conflicts that break out in one country do in fact have a tendency to spill over into adjacent countries. More important, Maarten Bosker and Joppe de Ree show unequivocally that “only ethnic [civil] wars spill over [interstate boundaries], and only along ethnic lines.” Nevertheless, the exact processes that characterize the cross-border spread of civil wars remain opaque.

It is commonly argued that sectarian conflict in one state tends to precipitate parallel conflicts in one or more

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neighboring states by way of a “demonstration effect.” Three kinds of demonstration effect can be discerned in the existing scholarship on civil wars. First, as a result of sectarian warfare in one state, the aggrieved members of the combatant community who reside in a neighboring state become more likely to get inspired to resort to force themselves. Second, David Lake and Donald Rothchild propose that fighting in a nearby state makes members of the combatant community more likely to raise extreme demands on their own government. Third, whenever sectarian war breaks out in one state, leaders and constituents of the sectarian community in neighboring countries take note of effective mobilization strategies, which they then adopt for their own internal struggles.

Demonstration effects are usually associated with particular outcomes in the state where conflict initially occurs. The potential for sectarian conflict to spread tends to be much greater if challenges to the regime on the part of the community in the initial country turn out to be successful. Similarly, the likelihood that conflict will spread can also be expected to be higher if the conflict forces the authorities in the initial country to make significant concessions to the challengers. Furthermore, Barry Weingast claims that conflict is more likely to spread to surrounding states whenever events in one country heighten the degree of uncertainty about one another’s intentions that is harbored by sectarian communities

8 Alternatively, sectarian conflict in one state provides an opportunity for festering local rivalries and feuds – of whatever stripe – in the neighboring state(s) to become expressed in overtly sectarian terms.

Besides demonstration effects, strategic dynamics contribute to the spread of sectarian conflict. Nathan Danneman and Emily Ritter argue that whenever sectarian conflict takes place in one state, the governments of adjacent states become more likely to take steps intended to head off similar outbreaks of violence at home. These measures may sometimes succeed in blocking the spread of the conflict, but they most frequently instead spark violent responses from members of the combatant community located inside the adjacent country. More important, steps that are undertaken by surrounding governments to block the cross-border spread of sectarian conflict are likely to raise the salience of plausible distinctions across nascent sectarian communities at home, which can be expected to galvanize potential community members into mutually antagonistic formations that had previously been muted or nonexistent.

Specialists in the comparative politics of civil wars claim that whenever actual fighting erupts involving a sectarian community in any one state, members of that same community who reside in neighboring states become more likely to adopt violent strategies in order to obtain their

demands. The likelihood that neighboring communities will turn to violence is particularly high if the sectarian community in question straddles the boundary that separates adjacent countries from one another. Under these circumstances, members of the sectarian community in one state will usually provide material and moral support for challengers residing in the other state(s). In addition, members of the community who live outside any given country tend to be more confrontational in their rhetoric and actions than those who reside inside, and will do their best to escalate conflicts involving their coreligionists.

More generally, the outbreak of sectarian warfare almost always generates a flood of refugees, which disperses into neighboring countries, bringing with it a whole variety of “negative externalities.” Refugees usually introduce into the receiving country clusters of armed fighters, who quickly make unprecedented demands on the local authorities. Erika Forsberg asserts that displaced persons have a tendency to transform the sectarian order in the receiving country from one that is broadly unipolar into one that can best be called bipolar, that is, which pits two rival communities directly against each other. Along the same lines, one might hypothesize that the arrival of large numbers of refugees, particularly if they include armed fighters, is likely to transform bipolar sectarian orders in surrounding countries into multipolar orders, thereby sharply reducing the degree of certainty and stability that had earlier characterized politics in the receiving country.

One might also extrapolate the logic of power transition theory in order to explain the potential for armed conflict between dominant and challenging communities as refugees arrive.

Less directly, the flow of refugees is apt to incite the kindred population in the receiving country to rise up in protest against whatever actual or perceived maltreatment the authorities inflict on the new arrivals. At an even further remove, any influx of refugees is likely to provoke hostility on the part of other surrounding countries, which the government of the receiving country will take steps to ameliorate, but only at the cost of prompting armed fighters to start challenging the authorities of the host state.

There can be little doubt that a flood of refugees fleeing sectarian conflict will create severe problems for the receiving country’s economy. The new arrivals are highly likely to depress wages and raise housing costs, most notably in particular regions of the host country. Furthermore, an influx of new members of a given sectarian community will most often upset the social equilibrium that exists in the receiving country. If the refugees identify with a minority sectarian community in the receiving country, they will most likely pose a marked threat to the majority; if, on the other hand, the refugees identify with the sectarian majority in the host country, then “minority groups may feel that the influx of foreigners further dilutes their strength” and strike out at the new arrivals.

Refugees seem particularly likely to displace long-time

22 Ibid. 344.
23 Ibid. 341.
24 Ibid. 344.
27 Ibid. 343.
residents of the receiving country, who will respond by mobilizing themselves into “sons of the soil” movements to protect their long-standing position and prerogatives. Moreover, refugees most often challenge the cultural practices or political position of leaders in the receiving country’s existing sectarian community. The beleaguered leadership will then resort to violence in desperate attempt to preserve or restore the status quo ante. Finally, Idean Salehyan and Kristian Gleditsch note in passing that refugees are apt to introduce new types of disease, and other pressing public health problems, into the receiving country, thereby aggravating popular discontent.

Whether or not the fighting generates flows of refugees, sectarian conflict that breaks out in one state is more likely to spread to surrounding countries if the parallel sectarian community in the adjacent state(s) faces structural conditions that are similar to the ones that exist in the initial country. Conflict tends to spread, for example, whenever communities living in both states suffer due to analogous forms of official discrimination. Under these circumstances, sectarian leaderships in the two countries will be more apt to see the same kinds of issues as worth fighting over.

Monica Toft asserts that sectarian conflict is much more likely to spread across borders whenever the combatant community that resides in the adjacent country is geographically concentrated. The likelihood that conflict will jump across the border is particularly high if the concentrated community in the neighboring country constitutes a majority in some well-defined region. Or if it is numerically large, compared to the total population of the adjacent country. The latter argument looks open to question, in light of the free rider problem that bedevils most social movements. So perhaps conflict will end up being less likely to take shape in the neighboring country whenever the sectarian community there makes up a very large component of local society.

Other factors have been connected to the emergence of civil conflict, which seem pertinent to the spread of sectarian violence. Sectarian uprisings will be more likely to cross borders if the combatant community in the adjacent country occupies rough terrain, and if it is clustered in space at a comparatively far distance from provincial administrative centers. Conflict also tends to spread whenever sectarian communities in the adjacent country are “highly polarized.” James Fearon further claims that sectarian conflict will tend to erupt if the kindred communities that exist in a given cluster of neighboring countries exhibit “nesting,” that is, if a sectarian community that constitutes a minority in one country at the same time makes up the majority in a neighboring country.

More broadly, one can expect sectarian conflict to spread if the dominant sectarian community that is present in a neighboring country becomes unable credibly to commit itself not to exploit the disadvantaged community in the

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35 Forsberg (2014).
38 Forsberg (2008) “Polarization and Ethnic Conflict in a Widened Strategic Setting.”
foreseeable future. Profound commitment problems are particularly likely to be associated with regimes whose political and legal institutions are relatively weak. The collapse of existing credible commitments against exploitation is particularly important if it takes place at the same time that the minority community finds its capacity to protect its interests to be deteriorating, or if the outcome of any potential conflict among sectarian communities becomes uncertain. Forsberg asserts that a sharp decline in the degree of certainty concerning conflict outcomes is usually associated with a greater degree of sectarian polarization.

It is widely affirmed that civil conflict is more likely to spread to a neighboring country if that country is comparatively poor, although Bosker and de Ree report that the correlation between spreading conflict and neighboring country poverty is not statistically significant. Conflict seems more likely to spread whenever the adjacent state has minimal institutional capacity, which Alex Braithwaite defines as both the capacity to deploy military forces to areas along the border and the “ability to manage domestic sentiment and persuade populations locally of the need to participate in legal opportunities rather than join or emulate rebellions observed within the neighborhood.” Along the same lines, sectarian conflict looks more likely to spread if the neighboring country has a political system that is neither a liberal democracy nor a severely repressive autocracy, i.e., if it is “anocratic” in nature.

Most recently, Jessica Maves and Alex Braithwaite demonstrate that conflict is more likely to jump borders if the neighboring country is an autocracy that has introduced a limited range of political reforms, most notably an elected parliament. One might add that the potential for conflict to spread will be greater whenever parliamentary representation in the neighboring country is institutionalized according to sectarian criteria.

Almost all studies of the spread of sectarian conflict make the problematic assumption that sectarian communities have a “primordial” existence. In other words, extant quantitative explorations of the dynamics of civil wars assume that religious and ethnic groups take part in politics as fully formed, unified actors. Influential conceptions of sectarian communities as socially constructed entities have yet to be incorporated into this growing body of scholarship. One study that does take the social construction of sectarianism seriously suggests that sectarian conflict will be much more likely to spread across borders whenever the neighboring country is characterized by cultural boundaries among potential sectarian communities that are highly ambiguous. Under such circumstances, the leaders of nascent or potential sectarian communities will have a strong incentive to spark sectarian conflict as a way to clarify and consolidate lines of difference among their primary constituencies.

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Courting fitnah: Saudi responses to the Arab Uprisings

By Augustus Richard Norton, Boston University

The logic and impact of Saudi interventions in Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria suggest a state pursuing confounding aims with improvised, if not impulsive policies. It is often asserted that the instability-averse Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a status quo power, but recent Saudi actions suggest that it seeks to undermine the status quo. Rather than revealing an aversion to instability, the kingdom has fed instability by radicalizing minority Arab Shiite populations in the Gulf, supporting proxy forces involved in armed struggle and, at least until recently, turning a blind eye to the recruitment of Saudis to join al Qaeda-affiliated groups outside Saudi borders. Referring to the interior minister, Madawi al-Rasheed wryly notes: “To put it bluntly, the prince did not succeed in eliminating terror; he simply pushed it away to countries like Yemen, Iraq, and now Syria and Lebanon.”

There are obvious security challenges in the Saudi neighborhood, including the continuing struggles underway in Yemen, persistent demonstrations in Bahrain, and the failure of the Iraqi government in Baghdad to broadly legitimate its power, but Saudi Arabia has not been an innocent bystander in any of these cases.

Recently revived fears in the Saudi hierarchy of mujahideen coming home to roost prompted the announcement of long prison sentences for Saudi nationals traveling abroad to fight for groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. Thus, the Saudi government is in the bizarre position of attempting to proscribe activities that are prescribed by the ideology that shapes the state and legitimates the regime.

Saudi efforts to recalibrate its materiel support in Syria, among other things, by sponsoring the creation of a rival Islamist militia, Jaish al-Islam, in contradistinction to Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), have been inconsequential in impact. The loose command structures, the fungibility of allegiance and membership, and the proliferation of side deals between militia groups, suggest the limits of Saudi influence on the ground (or of other external players for that matter). The ad hoc systems of arms dispersals by the Saudis, Qataris, Turks and, to a limited degree, the United States contribute to the disjointed order of battle of the opposition. Distinctions between “terrorist” and “non-terrorist” groups are sometimes arguable at best, as illustrated by the fact that the Saudi-endorsed Jaish al-Islam is known to have joined Jabhat al-Nusra in opprobrious attacks on civilians.

It is instructive that while Saudi Arabia is committed to the toppling of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and company, it has been sparing in its contributions to humanitarian groups attempting to relieve the suffering of millions of displaced Syrians. For instance, in 2013, the kingdom donated less than $12 million to the U.N. refugee agency UNHCR – in contrast to Kuwait, which donated $112 million. (The revised 2013 UNHCR budget for the Middle East, much of it Syria related, was nearly $1.5 billion.)

The vast majority of the one million Syrian refugees seeking sanctuary in Lebanon are Sunni Muslims (more than a quarter of Lebanon’s population prior to 2011 were Sunnis; today the proportion is certainly more than a third). Lebanon has been an important focus of Saudi involvement with the goal of buttressing the Sunni community and undercutting the Shiite militia Hezbollah, which is the most formidable military force in the country.

Saudi funds have buttressed the Lebanese Central Bank, and a recently announced $3 billion grant will fund a renovation of the Lebanese army. Any calculation for the potential impact of that comparatively large sum should begin with the fact that the Lebanese army devours a large proportion of state funds for salaries, benefits, and amenities for officers, which leaves little for basic needs. The army will now be able to acquire weapon systems, such as low-end jet fighters, from France, which the United States has not been willing to provide; U.S. arms transfers
are minutely calibrated to avoid posing any threat to Israel, or to challenge Israel's capacity to routinely violate Lebanese air and sea space. One military component that will benefit from Saudi funding will be the 12,000 special operations troops, which are now poorly equipped to cope with the increased security challenges emanating from the Syrian civil war.

One benefit of beefing up the army is that it would weaken the rationale for Hezbollah to engage in internal policing, as it now does along the Lebanese-Syrian border in the governate of the north, a prime area for recruitment to groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Jaish al-Islam. While strengthening the Lebanese army is meritorious, supporters of Hezbollah are quick to note that they must rely on the militia to defend them against Israel because the army lacks the ability to deter an attack by the Israeli Defense Forces.

There have been episodes of the army engaging internal forces, this occurred in the period following the Israeli invasion of 1982 and General Michel Aoun's campaign against the Lebanese Forces at the end of the same decade, but in Lebanese senior officer ranks these forays are well-understood object lessons that counsel reticence about deploying the army – in which the rank and file are predominantly Sunni and Shiite – in campaigns against formidable militias such as Hezbollah.

Lebanon has felt Saudi influence in another significant respect, and that is through the transnational impact of Saudi origin militant Salafism, which is quite evident in Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city. Tripoli and the Muhafazah (governate) of the north have become a cauldron of anti-Shiite enmity. Tripoli is now an important center for recruitment to fight in Syria (a book in progress by Bernard Rougier offers rich ethnographic detail on the topic). Militant figures, often straight out of Saudi prisons have made their way to Tripoli and the surrounding areas. As a minimum, rather than keeping tabs on militants, Saudi security officials seem to look the other way as the militants slip through the exit turnstiles.

Meantime, relations between Riyadh and Washington are strained and chilly, in large measure because of the initial U.S. embrace of the Arab awakenings as well as the forward momentum in the P5+1 negotiations with Iran. There appears to be a deep sense of frustration in the royal chambers. Saudi options are limited given its inextricable security dependence on the United States. There has been a fair amount of speculation and piffle about the possibility of Saudi Arabia and other regional states pursuing their own nuclear programs if Iranian nuclear capabilities remain substantially intact, which is likely. The nuclear option provides some negotiating leverage vis-à-vis the United States and other powers, but the Iranian program is a reminder of the economy of scale that a credible program presumes quite aside from the strategic disincentives and risks of going nuclear.

Vali Nasr argues in a recent commentary that the Saudis are angry about U.S. negotiations with Iran and the stated intention of the United States to pivot its attention to Asia. He argues that the United States needs to work to satiate Saudi apprehensions, for instance by moving to resolve the Syrian civil war. The fact of the matter is that short of capitulating to the regime’s worldview, there is little chance of the Saudis’ anger being mitigated by the United States as long as Washington is pursuing a diplomatic solution with Iran. When President Barrack Obama visits King Abdullah in late March it will be a surprise of historic proportions if the two sides are able to do more than paper over their profound differences, even after a recent preparatory visit to Washington by Interior Minister Muhammad bin Nayef (who is hardly a herald of reconciliation).

It is Iran’s quest of hegemony that focuses the mind of the royal family, and much as Cold War era U.S. leaders were fixated on the Soviet threat, so the Saudis have a penchant for reading events through Persian-tinted lenses. It is Iran’s quest of hegemony that focuses the mind of the royal family. This was accentuated when the Sunni-dominated Iraqi regime was supplanted by a quintessential Shiite regime with, need we add, the key assistance of an Anglo-American invasion and occupation. That Iran was the major geopolitical beneficiary of the invasion is obvious.
It is indicative of Saudi contempt for the current Iraqi government in Baghdad that 11 years after the toppling of the Baathist regime Saudi Arabia still lacks a resident ambassador in Baghdad. (The Saudi ambassador to Jordan is also accredited to Iraq, but he is not seen in Baghdad according to Iraqi officials who would know.)

If the kingdom is unhappy with the geostrategic cards being played by the United States and its European allies, its intrinsic insecurity was also awakened by the Arab uprisings that began in Tunisia. The deep-seated insecurity that marks the Saudi regime is hardly unique either in the Arab world, or more broadly in authoritarian states around the globe. Despite the obvious differences between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for instance, the penchant of the former Mubarak regime and the present Saud regime to dole out relatively meaningless reforms while keeping a firm grip on power is striking.

While the particularities vary, the defining principle of these regimes has been après moi le déluge, which is to say even allowing a small crack in the dam is potentially calamitous. Hence, there is a record of periodic cosmetic domestic “reforms,” often packaged in pretty paper for foreign observers while seen by citizens and subjects as unimportant. “Reforms” undergirded by sweeping prohibitions on public assembly and even tepid dissent are contradictions in terms. (The pattern is well demonstrated in Egypt under the tutelage of Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.) So long as peacefully challenging the power structure exposes “violators” to draconian punishments or disproportionate retribution the incentives for violence are obvious.

The neurotic response of Riyadh to calls for political reforms at home is somewhat paradoxical. Although a few scholars anticipate the fall of the Arabian Peninsula monarchies – Christopher Davidson, author of After the Sheikhs, springs to mind – this possibility seems a distant prospect, at best. In this respect, Gregory Gause’s assessment may have it right, which is to say that the Gulf monarchies are not culturally predestined or necessarily more adept at running economies or implementing economic efficiencies, but they are also not “one bullet” regimes. A large network of inter-married princely families assures that familiar hands pull a variety of levers of power, as well as hold ample purses to reward compliance. Equally important, insofar as the demands of discontented Saudis are voiced, there is little appetite for regime change, even among Saudi youth.

In the uprisings in the Maghrib and the Mashriq, young men and women played a seminal role in demonstrations. The motivations of these multitudes of young people are not hard to fathom. This is a generation that faces limited job prospects, curtailed marriage opportunities, and corrupt, unresponsive politics. In an excellent monograph, An Uncertain Future (2013) Chloe Mulderig aptly notes that this is a generation confronting “adulthood denied.”

There is a different profile in Saudi Arabia. The respected journalist Caryle Murphy lived from more than a year in the kingdom to research A Kingdom’s Future (2013). She interviewed many Saudi youths and certainly encountered complaints and yearnings for change. Even so, her respondents revealed great trepidation about following the paths of revolutionaries in Tunisia, Egypt, or Yemen, not to mention Iraq. Among her interlocutors stability was highly valued; unlike young Egyptians and Tunisians they do not want regime change, but reform and improvement in life’s circumstances.

Of course, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated a keen intolerance for protests, and doubly so in the case of the minority Shiite population, which is often subjected to harsh punishments. In recent weeks, protesters in Qatif have been tossed in prison for 20 years for having the temerity to protest publically. The Shiite Saudis are not merely anomalous in the Wahhabi worldview, but they are regularly portrayed as stalking horses for Iran. In fact, the historical affinities of the Saudi Shiite population of the Eastern Province are to the Arab Shiite (Baharna) of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq. The hawza of Najaf, Iraq looms far larger that the domes of Qum, Iran and the leading jurisconsults in recent years have been Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani of Najaf and the late Grand Ayatollah
Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah of Beirut, Lebanon. Most demands for meaningful accountability and expanded personal rights in Saudi Arabia are seen as a potential security threat, but this is particularly so of Hasawi demands, which are perceived, as Fred Wehrey notes, as Iran-supported demands.

This was certainly so in Bahrain in March 2011, when Saudi troops accompanied by a convoy of UAE troops intervened to attempt to write finish to popular demonstrations and a U.S. mediated reform initiative. The initiative would have shifted Bahrain toward a constitutional monarchy and enhanced the standing of Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa while expanding the rights of the majority Shiite community. The intervention was facilitated with the collusion of long-serving Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Khalifa (“Mister Ten Percent” is a common moniker of Bahrainis speaking privately), who is no advocate of reform. The operative principle for the Saudi monarch, a Gulf diplomat observed, is that no diminishment in the power of a monarch will be permitted. Bahraini and the Saudi officials alleged (largely non-existent) links between moderate reformists in Bahrain and Iran. Indeed, the best evidence for Iranian meddling was an inopportune visit to Beirut (including meetings with Hezbollah officials) by officials of al-Haq, the radical opponent of the mainstream al-Wefaq. The predictable subsequent radicalization of the majority Baharna is marshaled by Saudi Arabia and its allies to validate its narrative. Even if unconfirmed recent reports of tripartite Saudi-Iranian-U.S. talks in Oman prove accurate, the status quo in Bahrain is unlikely to change significantly.

The Saudi regime is intent on solidifying its sphere of influence, as demonstrated in its recent effort to ostracize Qatar for its support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and other sins. The UAE and ever-obedient Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar, and succeeded in revealing a decisive, perhaps fatal crack in the Gulf Cooperation Council. This coincided with Riyadh’s declaration that the Muslim Brotherhood (and some affiliated groups such as Hamas) is a terrorist organization, which provides yet another bludgeon to wield against both domestic opponents and many who resist the coup d’etat in Egypt.

In Riyadh, the uprisings that began in Tunis merely were a prelude to chaos, which is certainly arguable. Yet, Saudis have proven quite willing to make their own contributions to chaos.

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Visions of Gulf Security

The contest for “youth” in the GCC

By Kristin Smith Diwan, American University School of International Service

There is no question that youth have played an outsized role in initiating the political uprisings and sustaining the protests that have characterized the tumultuous politics since the Arab Awakening of 2011. While no Gulf monarchies were toppled, the escalation in mostly youth-led oppositional activity has changed the security calculus of Gulf governments. Their response has included actions—both concessional and punitive—specifically targeting “youth” as a constituency.

This memo examines the emergence of “youth” as a political category, reviewing their problematic place in the literature and outlining the implications of the rise of youth activism in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and the government response to it. I argue that the generational divide—shaped by a new media environment and in some Gulf states the deterioration of the welfare state—is challenging not only the state, but key mediators of state power: tribes and Islamist movements. Its impact, then, is systemic and lasting, and will require significant adaptations by Gulf states beyond suppression of a “Gulf Arab Spring.”

Where to find “youth” in the literature?

“Youth” is problematic as an analytic category, given its broad scope and intersection with many issues. Thus the question of youth and its impact on politics has been addressed within many different literatures.

There is a sizeable literature at the intersection of economics and security examining the “youth bulge” and its ramifications for development and stability. The influential Arab Human Development Report identified deficits in education, social empowerment, and political freedom that are resulting in inadequate opportunities for future generations. After September 11, 2001 the linkage was made between this more development-oriented literature and an earlier literature positing the link between youth bulges and political violence. Scholars and policymakers turned their attention to the problem of the radicalization of disaffected youth due to unemployment and relative deprivation.

This analysis sits uneasily with another body of literature building on the work of scholars of media and communication examining the transformative impact of the new media environment. This literature often takes a special interest in the youth segment as the early adopters and most avid users of new media. The global connection facilitated by new media is thus seen as a key factor in cultural shift and the emergence of a new, more networked form of activism. From a security perspective, this literature suggests that new media reduce costs for organization and information sharing, inviting a debate on their potential to force accountability and even political change. It also emphasizes the inability of governments to fully control this new information environment.

A third body of literature most associated with the sociologist Asef Bayat takes the most analytically

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sophisticated approach to defining “youth” as a legitimate category of social inquiry. His emphasis on “non-movement” movements offers an alternative and less direct mechanism for gradually effecting political change through shifting cultural norms. An extension of this argument looks at the emergence of a post-Islamist trend, and the challenge this presents to Islamic movements.

All three literatures expect new difficulties in integrating youth within existing sociopolitical institutions, whether due to economic limitations, opportunities offered by the new media environment, or cultural change.

Gulf youth activism in the Arab Awakening

A trend toward new forms of youth activism was apparent in the GCC states prior to the wave of uprisings in the Arab world in 2011. It can be seen in the social networks formed through Bahraini and Omani internet forums, in the 2006 “Orange movement” which successfully pressed for electoral reform in Kuwait, and in Saudi volunteerism in the wake of the 2009 Jeddah floods. These early manifestations point to growing frustrations over the declining effectiveness of the welfare state and the inadequacy of the political elite to address these concerns. They also clearly point to the use of new media – especially internet chat rooms and blogs – to facilitate information sharing and enable new coalitions beyond existing political groups.

The first two years of the Arab Awakening accelerated this trend toward youth activism, as Gulf youth took inspiration from the early successes of Egyptian and Tunisian youth-led revolts. Within each state, there is an expansion in the existing repertoires of contention, as Gulf youth adapted slogans and methods of Egyptian revolutionaries to their own context. In the two poorest Gulf states, Oman and Bahrain, demonstrators created protest encampments reminiscent of Egypt’s Tahrir Square. The most politically active populations, Bahrain and Kuwait, witnessed the largest protest marches in their history, facilitated by calls on Facebook and Twitter. Even the more politically conservative Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where protests were explicitly forbidden as un-Islamic by the religious authorities, witnessed the adoption of limited protests calling for an improvement of facilities at a university campus in Abha, and much larger and politically pointed protests by Shiite youth in the Eastern Province.

The expansion in means of contention were matched by an escalation in both rhetoric and demands, as youth-led movements crossed established redlines and challenged existing taboos. In 2011 the hashtag “#Tal3mrak” emerged as a rare venue for publicly criticizing the Saudi king. Oman also saw the “de-sacralization” of the sultan, as graffiti calling for his fall appeared on walls in Sohar, and criticism usually reserved for his corrupt circle of ministers, began to extend to the sultan himself. In Kuwait and Bahrain the public challenge to the authority of the ruler was more direct. In Kuwait youth took up the chant “We will not let you” first delivered in a speech by the firebrand tribal populist Musallem al-Barrak, denouncing the ruler’s expected unilateral change in the electoral law: “We will not allow you, your highness, to take Kuwait into the abyss of autocracy...”
parliament and the objections of the emir. The lead-up to the premier’s resignation was notable for the use of street tactics by the youth-led opposition; marches and sit-ins in front of the parliament culminated in the actual storming of the parliament. However in Bahrain, three years of protests, now contained in Shiite villages and punctuated by sporadic violence, have failed to compel political concessions from a sharply divided monarchy.

**Government responses to youth activism**

The expansion in contentious politics, crossing of redlines, and escalation of demands embodied a new more defiant political culture by 2012. Ruling-family led governments did not remain passive in the face of these developments, enacting new restrictions on political expression and public assembly.

In Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman prosecutions mounted for violations of lese majeste, as rulers sought to reinstate the eroding taboo against insulting Gulf leaders. Demonstrations were met with force and arrests – and in the case of Bahrain and the Shiite communities of Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, deaths. Protests were banned in the capital city of Bahrain. New anti-terrorism regulations in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia criminalized acts that disturb the public order, defame officials, or threaten national unity. In Saudi Arabia ad hoc policies were created to directly counter youth assembly, even if non-political.

At the same time, Gulf governments began creating their own youth initiatives, to demonstrate their receptiveness to youth concerns, and to co-opt the energy of youth activism. In Bahrain, Nasser bin Mohammed al-Khalifa, the younger son of the king, spearheaded a number of youth-oriented initiatives from his perch heading the supreme council for youth and sports. Kuwait reorganized its cabinet, creating an independent ministry for youth affairs. The Emiri Diwan launched its own initiative, “Kuwait Listens,” with youth delegates drawn from civil society organizations. The UAE and Saudi Arabia also created youth initiatives to promote the democratic practice of the UAE’s Federal National Council and to support Saudi Arabia’s push for a Gulf Union.

**Impact and future trajectories**

Across the Gulf youth activists brought a more comprehensive critique of the ruling system, and rejection of existing political leaders and societies as incapable of delivering fundamental political reform. Gulf leaders countered youth-led initiatives with restrictions on speech and assembly and with attempts at co-optation. Gulf governments were aided by the weakness of national political coalitions able to carry youth demands and by the collapse in the fortunes of the transitioning states of the Arab Awakening, which has severely eroded the local appetite for change.

Still, an assessment of the security impact of increasing youth activism should not be restricted to a narrow focus on immediate political outcomes. The impact of shifting youth culture is more pervasive, and challenges not only states but important mediators of state power: tribes and Islamist movements.

In Kuwait, activist youth have refused to participate in the tribal primaries that augment tribal power in the parliament. Tribal sheikhs sent by the Omani Ministry of Interior to mediate with youth enacting a “Tahrir-like” protest camp at a roundabout in Sohar were ridiculed and turned away.

Muslim Brotherhood youth have rebelled against the hierarchy and secrecy of their own organization, publishing their critiques in open blogs and pushing for a greater role in internal decision making. In Kuwait, they successfully demanded more autonomy for the Islamic Constitutional Movement, the Brotherhood’s political arm, and pulled it more firmly into the opposition camp.

Defectors from the Muslim Brotherhood – still dominated

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12 Indeed, Kuwait even prosecuted people for insulting other countries’ Gulf leaders.

by an older generation – are key animators of youth activism in Saudi Arabia and across the Gulf states. In Bahrain and in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, new and more radical political movements have formed as Shiite youth have broken from the dominant Shiite Islamist leadership, rejecting its strategy of engagement with the government.

These changes suggest that the generational challenge is more systemic, and likely can’t be addressed by security measures alone. The sad turn in regional politics – toward exclusion in Egypt and increasingly sectarian strife in Syria as well as Iraq – may be dampening the Gulf public’s appetite for change, but it carries its own dangers for Gulf states as evidenced by the Saudi king’s royal order against Saudis fighting abroad. As Gulf governments limit the space for independent activism, the appeal of “resistance” or “jihad” or sectarian vigilantism may once again capture a segment of disaffected youth.

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Human security in the Gulf
Concept or reality?

By Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Research Fellow, Rice University’s Baker Institute.

In 2009, I concluded in an article on evolving Gulf security agendas that “difficult challenges lie ahead” as the unavoidable transition to eventual post-re distributive models of governance would require ruling elites to address systemic structural challenges in their distinctive political economies. The article noted also that references to human security increasingly were entering into regional debates on security but suggested that regimes’ commitment to an inclusive or empowering vision of security was unlikely to take root, and that the likely outcome would be “a stalled ‘half-way house’ that suits neither the interests of the state or individuals and groups within society.”

During the period immediately prior to the Arab upheaval, the concept of “human security” began to be referenced with increasing frequency. Most notably, the fifth Arab Human Development Report, published in 2009, was entitled Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries and examined the symbiosis of human development with human security. The report suggested that “the trend in the region has been to focus more on the security of the state than on the security of the people,” and argued instead that “human security and state security are two sides of the same coin.” Yet, the concept of “human security” as a bottom-up approach focusing on individuals and communities was never understood by regional policymakers, who sought instead to appropriate an international “buzzword” as their own. A prime example of the attempt to seize the initiative was the choice of human security as the theme for the 2008 conference of the Arab

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1 Coates Ulrichsen 2009

2 AHDR 2009
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Women’s Organization, where genuine activists reported how they felt shut out of proceedings by the region’s first ladies. The partial advocacy of the concept of human security was fitted into a broader strategy to update regime security and legitimacy. Parallels may be drawn with the rhetoric of democratization and liberalization in the late-1990s and early-2000s when initial openings failed to translate into substantive reform. By presenting themselves as the agents of top-down processes of reform, ruling elites sought to control the pace and direction of change and deny agency to communities and individuals who might have their own distinct interests or objectives. However, the cathartic shock of the mass expressions of political discontent that toppled the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and the rapid spread of political upheaval to Bahrain, Yemen, and parts of Saudi Arabia in 2011 put an end to regional debates on human security. Rather, in the words of Mohammed Ayoob, the Saudi-led intervention into Bahrain in March 2011 revealed the “true colours” of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, which clearly prioritized regime security – synonymous with the security of the ruling families – over all else.

Policy responses to the Arab Spring have complicated greatly the challenge of finding a sustainable balance between competing and contradictory visions of what, and for whom, the concept and values of security involves. States in transition are vulnerable to political violence and social conflict, and the redistributive political economies of the Gulf States are especially vulnerable to the potential breakdown of mechanisms for spreading wealth and co-opting support. Signs of economic insecurity have since multiplied along with the attendant political difficulties of taking and implementing sensitive measures that would set GCC economies onto pathways of sustainable development. Writing just months into the Arab Spring, Steffen Hertog noted that the most damaging long-term impact of the upheaval in the Gulf would be economic rather than political, as the escalation of the politics of patronage “threaten to undermine not only the fiscal sustainability of GCC regimes, but also their strategies to integrate their populations into a diversifying economy.”

Research by Chatham House has underscored the systemic risk to the economic resilience of the GCC states of the inability to curb excessively wasteful patterns of resource usage. A report in December 2011 on the “hidden energy crisis” in Saudi Arabia drew attention to surging domestic energy consumption, as well as a Saudi Aramco warning that crude oil capacity could fall by up to 3 million barrels per day by 2028 on a “business as usual” scenario. High energy demands triggered by rapid population growth rates (with the trebling of Qatar’s population between 2006 and 2013 the most extreme example); energy-intensive industrial development; and heavily subsidized electricity, water, and diesel have added further to the burgeoning resource stresses on Gulf governments. In 2013, a report by the International Monetary Fund laid bare the economic inefficiency of energy subsidies by estimating that such costs ranged from between 9 percent and 28 percent of government revenue. Aside from constituting an extremely poor allocation of national resources, the soaring cost of subsidies also represented a heavy opportunity cost for governments in terms of lost potential funding for more urgent development needs.

Governments across the Gulf have acknowledged the urgency of subsidy reform but thus far little progress has been made. This reflects the sensitivity of political measures to recast the unproductive pillars that cushioned the transformative socio-economic (if not political) transition into the oil era and contributed to domestic stability ever since. In the face of the mounting difficulty of implementing macro-level economic reforms, GCC regimes have focused instead on consolidating their control over a narrowing base of political and societal support by sharpening the boundaries between the “ins” and “outs.” This is at its most extreme in Bahrain, where the

3 Coates Ulrichsen 2011
4 Ehteshami and Wright 2007
5 Ayoob 2011
6 Hertog 2011
7 Lahn and Stephens 2011
8 IMF 2013
government/ruling family appears to have decided that it can survive without the support of the archipelago’s Shiite majority as long as the regime’s core constituencies – both within and outside Bahrain – are secure.9

The prioritization of regime security through exclusionary measures that sharpen the politics of identity and belonging have primarily taken two forms. The first is the increasing use – in all Gulf states but most prevalent in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates – of citizenship as a tool for punishing dissenters and disloyalty. As far back as 2000, Anh Nga Longva noted that citizenship in the GCC states “is not an abstract institution” but rather a complex relationship between “individual and state, complexly mediated by ideas of authority, legitimacy, and allegiance,” while Nils Butenschon suggested compellingly that “citizenship is a scarce public good distributed by the state, a source of collective identity and an instrument of political control … It is the right to have rights.” A prominent example of the wielding of citizenship occurred in November 2012 when the citizenship of 31 Bahrainis was revoked for “causing damage to state security.” Among those affected was sociologist Abdulhadi Khalaf, who wrote subsequently that “a passport is not a right of citizenship, but rather an honour bestowed by the ruling family” who “reserve the right to grant or revoke this gift at any time.”

The second exclusionary response is the exacerbation of sectarian tensions and rhetoric intended in part to hinder the mobilization of a mass-based, inclusive opposition. Employing the tactics of “divide-and-rule,” GCC officials reacted to the outbreak of protests in 2011 by attributing the unrest to external manipulation owing loyalty initially to Iran and subsequently to the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition to attempting to deflect attention away from the root causes of domestic socio-economic and political grievances, officials calculated also that such approaches would gain the support of security partners in key Western capitals. The rise of sectarian politics across the Gulf and the wider region has been analyzed extensively in recent scholarly work by Toby Matthiesen, Lawrence Potter, and Fred Wehrey, among others.10 These works break new ground in the study of the politics of sectarian identity in the Gulf by integrating country case studies with wider regional developments in order to analyze the roots of – and the upsurge in – ethnic and sectarian conflict across the Middle East.

It is undoubtedly the case that the GCC states have weathered the immediate storm triggered by the Arab Spring, thereby confirming the regimes as the great survivors of the Arab world. As Gregory Gause has observed, the monarchies’ resilience is rooted in the strategies they have utilized in order to stay in power – namely, the deployment of hydrocarbon wealth to blunt popular demand for reform, and the maintenance of supporting coalitions of domestic interest groups, regional allies, and foreign patrons.11 This notwithstanding, the last three years have seen not merely the abandonment of even “window-dressing” attachment to the values of human security, but also the espousal of measures that do far more harm than good in the search for consensual political and economic development and social cohesion in the years ahead. By stripping away at broader approaches to security that could have assisted regimes to construct more inclusive polities that can weather the eventual transition to post-redistributive economies, the measures taken have narrowed the socio-political base of regime support and undermined the strategies of economic diversification that were meant to smooth the path to sustainability. The archetype of the “post-Arab Spring” regional security landscape is the GCC Security Pact agreed in Riyadh in November 2012 and kept secret from public and political opinion alike, leading the speaker of Kuwait’s National Assembly to warn that “our constitution and laws are red lines that cannot be undermined.”

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9 Gengler 2014 forthcoming

10 Matthiesen 2013, Potter 2013, Wehrey 2013

11 Gause 2013
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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.