



ISLAM *in a* CHANGING MIDDLE EAST

The Gulf's Escalating Sectarianism

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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 Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see <http://www.pomeps.org>.

On January 2, Saudi Arabia executed 47 men, including prominent cleric and political activist Nimr al-Nimr. This sparked immediate backlash, especially among domestic and global Shiite communities. Unfortunately, such rising sectarian tensions are nothing new in the region. Although the media is quick to highlight the Sunni-Shiite divide, it generally points to this split as the root cause of conflicts. How are we to get beyond this primordialist rhetoric and study the real impacts and causes of sectarianism in the region? POMEPS Briefing 28, “The Gulf’s Escalating Sectarianism,” collects 16 pieces previously published by the Project on Middle East Political Science and the *Monkey Cage* to provide a more nuanced look of this divisive trend.

There is a growing body of scholarship that places sectarianism within the study of comparative politics and international relations, rather than treating sectarian identity as an unchanging, essentialist trait. Authors in this collection demonstrate how political elites use sectarian language to legitimize authoritarian rule, consolidate power, and rally against internal and external foes. What appear on the surface as entrenched confessional divides are often more about political and economic power than religion. Interested readers should also look at the 2013 POMEPS Studies 4 “The Politics of Sectarianism,” much of which remains relevant today.

Analysis of individual Gulf states’ domestic and geopolitical maneuvering supports this theoretical framework. In Saudi Arabia, the new leadership is able to refocus attention away from its international and domestic failures by increasing pressure on Shiite dissidents and provoking its main regional rival, Iran. And, in the wake of the nuclear agreement, the increasing Iranian influence gives Saudi Arabia another reason to amp up the sectarian vehemence. Meanwhile in Yemen, the labels of sectarianism fail to tell the whole story, while in Iraq and Syria violence in the name of sectarian identity continues to polarize and entrench both sides. The Arab uprisings challenged the traditional regional powers, and Sunni leaders continue to vie for prominence in this new order. Meanwhile, the increasing use of information technology and social media reinforces existing communities, while further polarizing users and citizens.

POMEPS Briefing 28 “The Gulf’s Escalating Sectarianism” provides crucial analysis from top scholars on the role of this spiraling sectarian rift in the region.

Lauren Baker
POMEPS Project Coordinator
January 5, 2016

Theoretical Perspectives

Why Saudi Arabia escalated the Middle East's sectarian conflict

By Marc Lynch, January 4, 2016

The January 2 execution of Saudi Shiite cleric and political activist Nimr al-Nimr has escalated sectarian hostilities in the Middle East to dangerous new levels. Following the sacking of a Saudi embassy in Iran, Saudi Arabia has severed ties with Iran and expelled its diplomats. Tensions are running high, with apocalyptic rhetoric on all sides.

However, for all the fireworks this escalation will probably not change much. Saudi Arabia and Iran have been engaged in a proxy war at various temperatures over regional order for many years. The Syrian peace process may be derailed and even more weapons pour into its horrifyingly destructive stalemate, but few really believed in its prospects anyway. The war in Yemen will likely continue on the same current destructive course as before, where even the coming and going of a ceasefire affected fighting on the ground little. The campaign against the Islamic State may become a bit more complicated, but the Gulf states long ago shifted most of their military attention towards Yemen. The United States has not become any more likely to walk away from its painstakingly negotiated nuclear agreement with Iran.

Still, the fallout from Nimr's execution has clearly roiled regional politics. There seems little question that this was an intentional escalation by the Saudi leadership, which could not have been surprised by the regional and international backlash. The most surprising result of the execution was that it shattered the red lines that had governed Saudi management of Shiite dissent for decades. As Toby Matthiesen has described in depth, Shiite activists such as Nimr would routinely be harassed, imprisoned and subjected to legal and extralegal pressures but eventually released when politics dictated outreach and reconciliation. No Shiite cleric of comparable stature has been executed in many years.

Why escalate now, then? Sectarianism itself does not explain very much. Little has changed since the winter of

2013, when I analyzed growing sectarianism in terms of the cynical manipulation of identity politics by regimes seeking to advance their domestic and foreign policy interests. The idea of an unending, primordial conflict between Sunnis and Shiites explains little about the ebbs and flows of regional politics. This is not a resurgence of a 1400 year-old conflict. Sectarianism today is intense, but that is because of politics. The continuing reverberations of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the Syrian civil war and the Iranian nuclear deal have far more to do with the current spike in sectarianism than some timeless essence of religious difference.

Saudi use of sectarianism in its domestic and regional policies is the subject of a robust political science literature. As influentially described by Gregory Gause, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf regimes tend to balance against both domestic and foreign threats. Anti-Shiite mobilization has long been viewed as an effective way of blunting Iran's appeal to Sunnis, while serving as a currency in intra-Sunni competition for influence. Recent books by Toby Matthiesen and Fred Wehrey effectively demonstrate how sectarian foreign policy also maintains domestic regime stability. Mobilizing sectarian tension abroad should be understood both as a gambit within the region's power politics as well as a way to maintain domestic control.

From this perspective, the new sectarian escalation is driven by Riyadh's curious, and dangerous, mixture of perceived threat and opportunity, strength and weakness. Saudi Arabia is uniquely strong within Arab politics at the moment. It can rely on the momentary close partnership of the United Arab Emirates and the temporary weakness of traditional powers such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Saudi's primary intra-Sunni state rivals, Turkey and Qatar, have been chastened by multiple setbacks, and each has sought to rebuild relations with Riyadh. And, for the moment, it has defeated the challenge of the Arab uprising.

But Saudi Arabia clearly feels vulnerable as well. Its floundering wars in Syria and Yemen, the rise of the Islamic State and the Iran nuclear deal have left it feeling profoundly vulnerable. This combination of strength and vulnerability has made for erratic foreign policy – especially with an aggressive new leadership eager to make its mark.

This is not to minimize domestic political challenges, including the battle to succeed King Salman, ramifications of cheap oil and unprecedented budget deficits. But it appears that the Saudi regime, as Gause would predict, is responding to the greatest perceived threat to its survival, which, in this case, means primarily foreign rather than domestic challenges. Foreign policy also seems to offer a cheaper and easier way to address domestic challenges. At least three major reasons have led Saudi Arabia to escalate the sectarian regional cold war now:

The Iran nuclear deal: The Saudi escalation is above all driven by its fear of the potential success of the U.S. deal with Iran over its nuclear weapons program. Saudi Arabia views Iran's reintegration into the international order and its evolving relationship with Washington as a profound threat to its own regional position. Mobilizing anti-Shiite sectarianism is a familiar move in its effort to sustain Iranian containment and isolation. The Saudis have been opposed to virtually every major American policy initiative in the Middle East over the last five years – not only the Iran deal, but also American support for Egyptian democracy and Obama's resistance to intervening in Syria. The sectarian escalation likely is meant to undermine America's primary strategic objectives in the region such as the Iran deal and a negotiated end to the Syria war by inflaming tensions in ways that make diplomatic progress impossible.

Foreign policy failure: The Saudi escalation likely aims to distract regional and domestic audiences from the manifest failures of its signature policies. It failed to block the Iran deal despite its widely aired public opposition and generally has seen its vital alliance with the United States shaken. Its policy of backing insurgency in Syria has failed to remove the Assad regime despite massive human suffering, while the insurgency has radicalized and the

Islamic State has emerged. The intervention in Yemen is now widely recognized as a strategic failure that has failed to accomplish its goals, grinding on at enormous human cost. A public dispute with Iran helps to distract from all of that and return attention to a familiar enemy.

Sunni leadership: Iran may be less the target of the escalation than other Sunni rivals. Saudi diplomacy has focused intently on efforts to consolidate its leadership of a reconstituted "Sunni" regional order. Riyadh recently announced with much fanfare an "Islamic Coalition" against terrorism and has presented its Yemen war coalition as a model for Arab collective action. Its influence has limits, though. Despite the superficial unity of the Riyadh conference for the Syrian opposition and the joint support for new rebel formations, Qatar and Turkey continue to compete with Saudi Arabia for influence with the insurgency. Beyond Bahrain, it seems unlikely that the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council will follow its lead in severing ties with Iran. Even the UAE only agreed to downgrade relations with Tehran.

Meanwhile, Sunni Islamist networks continue to challenge key Saudi policies. The domination of the Syrian insurgency by sectarian jihadist factions has created powerful groups with their own agendas. Long time Saudi nemesis Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has gained significantly from Yemen's chaos. The push to repress and criminalize the Muslim Brotherhood remains extremely unpopular with many influential Saudi Islamists. Executing Nimr and provoking confrontation with Iran has been far more popular with these Islamist elements, helping to keep them on board for a time.

So is this just more of the same? Not quite. Other structural changes in the region now make unleashed sectarian passions much harder to control than they might have been in the past. Young Arabs coming of political age since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 have never known anything besides daily images or the lived reality of violent sectarian conflict. The sectarian texture of the region's current wars, above all in Syria, has deeply permeated the identity politics and public discourse following the failure of the Arab uprising.

As Bassel Salloukh has argued, the Arab uprising of 2011 revealed the profound weakness behind the fierce façade of the region's states. Autocratic regimes may have beaten back, reversed or co-opted popular demands for democratic change, but domination lacking effective governance or broad-based legitimacy remains thin and unsteady. Most regimes have muddled along, surviving and adapting but keenly aware of their vulnerability. Sectarianism has always been a useful card for such weak but violent regimes to play in order to divide potential opponents and generate enthusiasm among supporters.

Then there are the states that have collapsed into civil war, such as Syria, Yemen and Libya. State failure, civil war and a hyperpartisan media create ideal conditions for sectarianism to take hold among frightened, angry, polarized communities. Syria's war has been the greatest incubator of sectarianism, with massive public and private campaigns across the Gulf mobilizing in support of a Sunni jihad against the Syrian regime and its Iranian and Hezbollah backers. Iran, Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias have similarly mobilized around identity and sect in support of the Assad regime.

Regional media has energetically promoted sectarian narratives to build support for wars in Syria and Yemen. Meanwhile, social media – with its propensity to push people into closed communities of the likeminded and its ability to rapidly circulate inflammatory videos and ideas – makes this polarization worse. Media and social media will only grow more influential as the information technology revolution continues to unfold; and, as of now, there are few forces in the current Arab public sphere pushing back against sectarian divisions.

The implications of the Saudi sectarian escalation for the region's high politics are likely overstated. The challenge to Iran and the mobilization of sectarian passions are part of the standard playbook for Riyadh when faced with regional and domestic challenges. But the new forces unleashed by the Arab uprising, from state weakness and civil wars to potent new media platforms, make this sectarian game much more dangerous than in the past. It will be far more difficult to deescalate these sectarian passions than it has been to inflame them.



Coming in from the Cold: How we may take sectarian identity politics seriously in the Middle East without playing to the tunes of regional power elites

By Helle Malmvig, August 19, 2015

**This memo was prepared for the International Relations and a new Middle East symposium.*

In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and especially the Syrian war, sectarianism appears to have become entrenched in Middle East regional politics. Rivalries and alliances are increasingly framed in sectarian terms, and the main conflicts of the region from Yemen to Syria and Iraq can all be said to entail a sectarian dimension. As Gause puts it: “There is no denying sectarianism’s important role in understanding current regional conflicts,” (Gause, 2014:4). However, while much of the literature agrees that sectarianism indeed has grown and deepened over the last decade or more, it paradoxically has difficulties understanding the eruption and meaning of sectarianism in regional politics. The three dominant approaches to sectarianism—primordialism, instrumentalism and historical sociology—all tend to explain sectarianism away, reducing the phenomenon to factors exterior to sectarian identity politics itself. This is unfortunate in so far as the explanatory focus is thereby moved away from what sectarianism is/or means, how it becomes a source of conflict and what makes it distinct and effective compared to other identity and ideational claims.

This short article, therefore, argues for taking sectarian identity politics seriously on its own terms. It claims that this can best be done by bringing in insights from poststructuralist theory in International Relations, particularly from the Copenhagen School’s conceptualization of securitization and religion. Drawing on securitization theory will allow us to bridge concerns with the power politics involved when regional actors and local elites make sectarian claims and the processes of social construction whereby sectarian identities are enacted and discursively framed as security threats.

Securitization theory and religion

Securitization theory’s core idea is that security can be analyzed as a speech act, which brings certain referent objects and threats into existence by being uttered as such by securitizing actors e.g. state representatives or political leaders. By making an effective security claim to a certain audience, a political issue is moved from the realm of normal politics into a realm of expediency, where extraordinary measures (e.g. military means) can be used (Wæver, 1995). Studying sectarianism from a securitization theory perspective will thus imply examining how political elites use sectarian discourses as powerful sources of legitimation and persuasion. However, sectarian articulations would be approached as articulations that produce the very sectarian community they invoke as being under threat, rather than as mere rhetoric or manipulated constructions. The analytical focus thereby shifts towards questions of meaning and social construction—such as how sectarian identities are produced and re-produced, what it means to speak in sectarian community terms, or how sectarian identities are imbued with certain specific characteristics through strategies of Othering—rather than to questions of the underlying intentions or drivers behind actors’ use of sectarian language—such as the quest for power, state interest or regime survival.

Secondly, while sectarian identities in this sense are taken seriously as socially constructed facts—in some respects similarly to a primordial approach—these are not presumed to have a certain essence that can be defined, neither to be inherently conflictual or antagonistic. Instead, I would argue that this needs to be approached as an empirical question of how a given identity relation is articulated and how it may become securitized over time with reference to a sectarian community under

threat. Obvious cases for such diachronic analysis of securitization would be the uprisings in Syria, in Yemen, or the post-2003 period in Iraq. For instance, the Syrian conflict initially hardly contained a sectarian dimension, but over time securitizing practices and discourses adopted by the regime, local “defence forces” and regional powers in particular, created self-fulfilling prophecies and anarchic security dynamics that prompted all actors to believe that their own community was threatened by the mere existence of the Other sect, and thus that the survival of their community ultimately was dependent on fighting the Other.

Thirdly, securitization theory argues that religion has its own distinct logic and a specific referent in the form of “faith” that securitizing actors claim to act in defence of (Wæver & Lausten, 2000, Sheikh, 2014). Sheikh stresses that religious claims therefore are different from other identity and ideological claims, and that religious forms of legitimation will have distinct effects in terms of conflict dynamics. Speaking in terms of the defence of religion will, according to Sheikh and Juergensmeyer, for instance enable the securitizing actor to claim that it is a religious duty to use extraordinary measures, enable actors to elevate conflicts to cosmic battles between good and evil, potentially turn wars into sacred and eternal struggles with no time limits, provide personal rewards in terms of redemption or heavenly luxuries, and make it easier to mobilize vast numbers of supporters who otherwise would not have been mobilized around a given political or social issue. Especially this latter point seems relevant in relation to the current securitization and regional mobilization around the Sunni-Shia rift, where sectarian referents effectively have elevated local conflicts to regional security problems.

Some of the above suggestions, however, may primarily be applicable to the study of jihadist and radical religious actors (such as the Islamic State, al Qaeda, or Jabrat al Nusra) and less to the study of sectarian discourses and practices employed by main regional power and actors. In part this may also be due to the fact that there *are* differences between making a religious and a sectarian claim. Although sectarian identity claims

may have faith as their security referent, the referent would more likely be a specific sectarian community that securitizing actors would claim to act in defence of. Sectarian identities are in this sense closer to ethnic and national identity constructions, more “political”, and often put forward within an already existing nation-state discursive framework¹. E.g. when Hezbollah legitimizes its military intervention in Syria, it does indeed articulate Sunni extremists and so-called *takfiris* as the Other and represents this Other as an existential threat. Yet Hezbollah does usually not explicitly refer to its own sectarian faith as being endangered, but rather to the identity of the whole of Lebanon.

The primordial, the instrumentalist, and the Historical Sociology approach

How does this perspective then depart from dominant ways of studying sectarianism in Middle East regional politics? The current literature on the role of sectarianism in Middle East regional politics can be divided into three different strands i) a primordial, ii) an instrumentalist, and iii) a historical sociology approach; with significant overlaps between the latter two.

The primordial approach is particularly dominant in the media, where it often implicitly guides the analysis of the region’s wars and competitions. But it also figures prominently in policy analysis and diplomatic circles. Within this perspective sectarian identities are presumed to lie at the roots of conflicts in the Middle East. The Shia-Sunni conflict is viewed as an ancient struggle, “for the soul of Islam, a great war of competing theologies and conceptions of sacred history and a manifestation of tribal wars of ethnicities and identities” (Nasr, 2007). The Sunni-Shia split is taken to be a primary conflict of the region that reaches back to the 7th century and continues to drive the politics of the region today. In this way the sectarian divide comes to explain present conflicts, but is not itself in need of explanation. Sectarian identities are assumed to be primary or natural, and they are presumably played out between two clearly defined religious sects – leaving little analytical space for the study of overlapping or inter-

sectarian identities. Although primordialists acknowledge that sectarianism has varied historically, and thus that it is not a constant in Middle East politics, this is largely interpreted as a type of overlay or repression that have kept latent sectarian identities under the radar. Abdo for instance argues that sectarian identities were kept in check by authoritarian regimes and strong state structures prior to 2011, and that the undermining of these orders - in the form of state collapse, revolution and sudden violence in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain – have allowed people to return to their primary identities and unleashed the tide of sectarianism (Abdo, 2013).

In contrast, instrumentalists are deeply skeptical about using a sectarian framework to explain the causes of the region's present struggles and rivalries. Sectarian identities are primarily seen as superficial political constructs, open to manipulation and exploitation by political elites, who use sectarian fear-mongering to garner vested patron-client relationships, as gateways to mass mobilization, or as powerful levers in regional rivalries. To understand why sectarianism has risen over the last decades, instrumentalists primarily look to the way that authoritarian states have exacerbated sectarian divisions both domestically and regionally in order to prop up their regimes and remain in power. Arab states have for decades skillfully manipulated fears of political exclusion and claimed to protect certain sections of the population from others. The Assad regime is for instance infamous for its strategy of self-fulfilling sectarianism, having succeeded in galvanizing support from Alawites and Christians communities in particular due to their fears of Sunni majority rule. Political leaders may also use sectarianism to discredit their political opponents and rivals. In fact attacking Shiites is often a result of rivalries between different Sunni faction, rather than being motivated by a larger Sunni-Shia struggle (Lynch, 2013). Precisely because sectarianism is exacerbated by, and plays into the hands of authoritarian regimes, instrumentalist caution that the primordialist approach may lead to dangerous political prescriptions (Gause, 2014, Lynch, 2013). As Marc Lynch points out, primordialist arguments "tend to lead towards solutions involving the heavy hand of authoritarian

states to suppress the supposedly inevitable violent clash of sectarian communities", or alternatively toward the partition of states into clean ethnic-sectarian enclaves, echoing the solutions applied to the Balkans in the 1990s (Lynch, 2013).

Moreover, instrumentalists rightly point out that the primordialist approach often neglects the multiple cross-cutting divisions, alliances and overlapping identities within the so-called Sunni and Shia camps. For instance by analyzing the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as a struggle driven by sectarian motivations, it is difficult to explain the alliance between Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, as well as the rivalry between Saudi-Arabia and Qatar. Indeed both Iran and Saudi-Arabia have crossed the sectarian fault line when seeking regional allies. Iran's close relationship with the Assad regime is not founded on an alawite-shia sectarian kinship, but rather on geo-strategic interest and a common position on Israel (Lynch, 2013, Ayub, 2013). Similarly to the logic in the domestic arena, Saudi-Arabia may use sectarianism regionally to mobilize local clients in conflict zones, or as a way to discredit Iran. But this is a part of a game for regional influence rather than a centuries-long religious dispute (Gause, 2014:5). Thus to instrumentalist, sectarianism is foremost an ideology that state actors conveniently employ either regionally in a classic realist balance of power, or domestically to hold on to state power (Gause, 2014, Lynch, 2013, Ayub, 2013, Delacarus)

Instrumentalists importantly point to the power and politics involved in sectarian identity politics, and to the analytical and political consequences of operating with an underlying assumption of essentialist identities. However, to instrumentalists sectarianism is precisely an "ism", a form of ideology up for grasp alongside other ideologies in the region. The conflation of ideology and identity is however problematic in several respects.

Firstly, sectarianism becomes a type of surface phenomenon—or in Marxist terminology a mere superstructure—underneath which one will find the real drivers of politics, i.e. material power and interest. In a reverse image of the primordialist—who implicitly

assumes sectarianism to be deep structure overlaid by power—instrumentalists see material power as a deep structure that moves sectarianism. This implies that sectarianism is removed from the equation and instead is explained away. In so far as sectarianism is assumed to be just another ideology cynically used by power-holders, instrumentalists are less well-equipped to explain why sectarian identity politics has become so prominent over the last decade, or what has made it so effective, compared to other ideologies available in the region. In other words, given that instrumentalists presume sectarianism is a mere expression of continuous universal power struggles, they are less focused on the particularities of sectarian identity formations or what it means to make sectarian claims.

Other scholars inspired by historical sociology therefore instead emphasize those historical path dependencies that have led to the recent thrive in sectarian identity politics (see e.g. Hinnebusch, 2014, Dodge, 2014, Heydemann, 2013). Dodge, for instance, argues that it is foremost the gradual weakening of state structures, the army, the policy force and the ability to deliver protection and services that creates the conditions of possibilities for sectarianism. When state institutions are eroding—because of sanctions, conflict, or foreign invasion—people turn to “whatever grouping, militia or identity that offers them the best chances of survival,” (Dodge, 2014:3). Analyzing the gradual break-down of state order in Iraq, Dodge points out how the withering of the state’s monopoly on collective violence, its civilian institutional capacity, and its infra-structural power all meant that Iraqis had to seek protection and services on a local and regional level instead. So-called “ethnic-religious entrepreneurs” were ready to jump in and supply these goods, and they were predominantly legitimizing their role in terms of communalistic identities. With the Arab uprisings in 2011, and the subsequent conflicts and weak/collapsing state structures, sectarian identity politics has gained further traction. Heydemann emphasizes how the deepening sectarianization of politics from the domestic sphere to the regional level now is a two-way street: Local conflicts have led to sectarian spill-over in neighboring states and have drawn in major regional actors along

sectarian lines. Regional politics have become locked into a strategic culture of sectarianism, just as regional actors have exacerbated local sectarian dynamics by establishing patron-client support structures based on sectarian affinities (Heydemann, 2013:11).

To scholars inspired by historical sociology, the rise of sectarian identity politics is thus primarily a question of sufficient strong state structures (or the lack thereof) at the domestic level prompting communities either to seek protection with sub-state actors or regional patrons. In contrast to instrumentalists, historical sociologists do, to a certain extent, analyze these identities as different from ideologies. Sectarian identities are seen as more entrenched than mere ideology and more difficult to change or reverse once they have become established in popular discourse and practices. However, as in the case of instrumentalists, sectarian identity itself is withdrawn from the explanation by making it a function of something else. Sectarian identifications constitute a type of fallback position ready to be used in situations of heightened insecurity and state collapse, in which individuals or groups, out of rational self-interest, seek safety, goods, and order. Thus, as in the case of the instrumentalist approach, sectarianism is implicitly presumed to be a tool for self-preservation and a form of passive undercurrent available to sub-state elites when state structures collapse.

Conclusion

This article has argued that there is a need to take sectarianism more seriously, without reducing sectarian identity politics either to an already given essence or explaining it away by factors exterior to sectarianism itself. Inspired by some of the key concepts of the Copenhagen School’s conceptualization of securitization, I presented an analytical focus on how sectarian identities becomes securitized and accepted as security threats over time, the power involved when securitizing actors make sectarian claims/representations, and what it means within a distinct discursive field to make a sectarian claim. In this sense, one might argue that securitization theory may potentially bridge key concerns of all three approaches:

the primordialists' concern with identity, instrumentalists' concern with power, and historical sociologists' concern with identity formation. However, empirical studies of sectarian identity politics in the Middle East have yet to be carried out from a securitization perspective. This piece has hopefully taken the first steps in this direction, but the fruitfulness of securitization theory for the study of sectarianism will of course ultimately depend on future empirical studies.

Yet arguably, securitization theory is primarily concerned with conflict situations and the discourses of political elites. This makes the theory well suited to address the

current Middle East regional order, but less to the everyday local sectarian practices. There anthropological approaches may have more to offer.

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¹ Yet different from these, notably because sectarian communities seldom aspire to statehood. Shia minority communities in the Gulf for instance, and even in Iraq hegemony over the state and its resources rather than carving out an independent state.



Explaining the spread of sectarian conflict: Insights from comparative politics

By Fred H. Lawson, March 21, 2014

** This memo was prepared for the "Visions of Gulf Security" workshop, March 9, 2014.*

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.¹ More important, Maarten Bosker and Joppe de Ree show unequivocally that "only ethnic [civil] wars spill over [interstate boundaries], and only along ethnic lines."² 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 neighboring states by way of a "demonstration effect."³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁷ 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 in the neighboring countries.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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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).¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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.”¹⁷ Refugees usually introduce into the receiving country clusters of armed fighters, who quickly make unprecedented demands on the local authorities.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²²

There can be little doubt that a flood of refugees fleeing sectarian conflict will create severe problems for the receiving country's economy.²³ The new arrivals are highly likely to depress wages and raise housing costs,²⁴ most notably in particular regions of the host country.²⁵ Furthermore, an influx of new members of a given sectarian community will most often upset the social equilibrium that exists in the receiving country.²⁶ 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.²⁷

Refugees seem particularly likely to displace long-time 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰

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.³¹ 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.³²

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.³³ 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.³⁴ Or if it is numerically large, compared to the total population of the adjacent country.³⁵ 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,³⁶ and if it is clustered in space at a comparatively far distance from provincial administrative centers.³⁷ Conflict also tends to spread whenever sectarian communities in the adjacent country are "highly polarized."³⁸ 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.³⁹

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 foreseeable future.⁴⁰ Profound commitment problems are particularly likely to be associated with regimes whose political and legal institutions are relatively weak.⁴¹ The collapse of existing credible commitments against exploitation is particularly important if it takes place at 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.⁴²

It is widely affirmed that civil conflict is more likely to spread to a neighboring country if that country is comparatively poor,⁴³ although Bosker and de Ree report that the correlation between spreading conflict and neighboring country poverty is not statistically significant.⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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The roots and future of sectarianism in the Gulf

By Frederic M. Wehrey, March 21, 2014

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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 malign. 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.

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 in 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 Shiite 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 Shiites 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 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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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); Brigitte 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).



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

By Toby Dodge, March 19, 2014

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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 be 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 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.”² 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.’”³ 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 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.⁷ In

circumstances of profound uncertainty, people will turn to whatever grouping, militia, or identity offers them the best chance of survival.⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ Previously “fuzzy” or passive identity traits can become politicized and “enumerated.”¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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 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 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 numbers to control the situation.²² 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.²³ 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 2007.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ Overall, the looting is estimated to have cost as much as \$12 billion, equal to a third of Iraq’s annual GDP.²⁸

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.²⁹ (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:

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.³⁰

In the aftermath of state failure, authoritative institutions, both societal and governmental, quickly lose their capacity and legitimacy.³¹ 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.³² 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.³³

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 Iraqis 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 country under Baathist rule.³⁴ 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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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.

² Daniel Byman, "Sectarianism afflicts the new Middle East," *Survival*, vol. 56, no. 1, Feb-March 2014, p. 80.

³ Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst & Co., 2011), p. 1.

⁴ Nir Rosen, "Anatomy of a Civil War; Iraq's Descent into Chaos," *Boston Review*, November–December, 2006.

⁵ Joseph Rothchild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 61.

⁶ Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, p. 25.

⁷ See Rothchild, *Ethnopolitics*, p. 29.

⁸ Andrea Kathryn Talentino, "The Two Faces of Nation-building: Developing Function and Identity," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 3, October 2004, p. 569.

⁹ David Laitin, *The Russian-speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 16.

¹⁰ Andreas Wimmer, "Democracy and Ethno-religious Conflict in Iraq," *Survival*, vol. 45, no. 4, Winter 2003–04, p. 120.

¹¹ On this distinction, see Sudipta Kaviraj, "On the Construction of Colonial Power, Structure, Discourse, Hegemony," in Dagmar Engles and Shula Marx (eds), *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Africa and India* (London: British Academic Press, 1994), pp. 21–32.

¹² Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, p. 33.

¹³ Nir Rosen, *Aftermath: Following the Bloodshed of America's Wars in the Muslim World* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), p. 30.

¹⁴ Anthony Shadid, "A Tradition of Faith Is Reclaimed on Blistered Feet," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2003, p. A01; Glenn Kessler and Dana Priest, "US Planners Surprised by Strength of Iraqi Shiites," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2003, p. A03; and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Worldly Roots of Religiosity in Post-Saddam Iraq," *Middle East Report*, no. 227, Summer 2003, p. 13.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Shiites Under Occupation," *Middle East Briefing*, Baghdad/Brussels, September 9, 2003, p. 8.

¹⁶ Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2007), p. 35.

¹⁷ Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War" pp. 75–6.

¹⁸ For the classic definition see Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 78–9.

¹⁹ Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results," in Michael Mann (ed.), *States, War and Capitalism: Studies in Political Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 4.

²⁰ See Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States. State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

²¹ See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998), p. 145; and Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980). On the lack of hegemony in the developing world see Nazih N.

Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), Chapter One.

²² On post-regime change violence see Simon Chesterman, *You, the People. The United Nations, Transitional Administration, and State-Building* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. 100, 112. On the estimated number of troops needed to impose order on Iraq see James Dobbins et al., *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2003), p. 197.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Michael E. O'Hanlon and Ian Livingston, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq*, October 31, 2010.

²⁵ On the sanctions regime and its effects on the Iraqi state and society, see Toby Dodge, "The Failure of Sanctions and the Evolution of International Policy Towards Iraq 1990–2003," *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 1, January 2010, pp. 82–90.

²⁶ David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Post-war Reconstruction Fiasco* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p. 135.

²⁷ Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 116.

²⁸ James Dobbins et al., *Occupying Iraq: A History of the Coalition Provisional Authority* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 111.

²⁹ Phillips estimates that the purge made 120,000 unemployed out of a total party membership of 2m. Paul Bremer cites intelligence estimates that the purge affected 1% of the party membership, or 20,000 people. George Packer estimates "at least thirty-five thousand." See Phillips, *Losing Iraq*, pp. 145–46; L. Paul Bremer III with Malcolm McConnell, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle To Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), p. 40; and George Packer, *Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 191.

³⁰ I. William Zartman, "Posing the Problem of State Collapse," in I. William Zartman (ed.), *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1995), p. 1.

³¹ Ibid., p. 6.

³² Ibid., p. 5.

³³ Nelson Kasfir, 'Domestic Anarchy, Security Dilemmas, and Violent Predation,' in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 55.

³⁴ Phebe Marr, "Who are Iraq's new leaders? What do they want?" United States Institute of Peace, Special Report, March 2006, p. 8.



The Politics of Sectarianism*

Marc Lynch, November 13, 2013

This piece served as an introduction to POMEPS Studies 4, The Politics of Sectarianism. Read the full collection here: <http://pomeps.org/2013/11/14/the-politics-of-sectarianism/>

A group of Syrian-Americans arrived at an academic conference at Lehigh University last week in Bashar al-Assad t-shirts and draped in Syrian flags adorned with Assad's face. They repeatedly heckled and interrupted speakers, and one told an opposition figure that he deserved a bullet in the head. When a speaker showed a slide picturing dead Syrian children, they burst into loud applause. When another speaker cynically predicted that Bashar would win a 2014 presidential vote, they cheered. In the final session, they aggressively interrupted and denounced a Lebanese journalist, with one ultimately throwing his shoe at the stage. The panel degenerated into a screaming match, until police arrived to clear the room.

This spectacle might seem notable in that it unfolded at a U.S. university, but otherwise it would pass for an alarmingly normal day at the office in today's toxically polarized Middle East. Such intense mutual hostility, irreconcilable narratives, and public denunciations are typical of any number of highly polarized political arenas across the region. A similar scene between supporters and opponents of Egypt's military coup is all too easily imagined — just add bullets. That's why the disproportionate focus on sectarian conflict as the defining feature of the emerging Middle East seems dangerously misplaced. Sunni-Shiite tensions are only one manifestation of how a number of deeper trends have come together in recent years to give frightening new power to identity politics writ large.

The explosion of Sunni-Shiite conflict in recent years has very little to do with intrinsic religious differences or with 1,400 years of Islamic history. It should instead be understood as an entirely typical example of identity

politics, one in which sectarian differences happen to be the most easily available to politicians hoping to exploit them for cynical purposes. It looks much the same as the ethnic and religious polarization that ripped apart the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. The sectarian polarization in Bahrain or Syria has followed very similar patterns to the Islamist-secularist polarization in Egypt and Tunisia. Responding to these sectarian tensions by embracing authoritarian states, focusing on religious authorities or exegesis, or promoting cross-sectarian reconciliation will miss the point. Today's sectarianism is political to the core — even if it increasingly seems at risk of racing beyond the control of its cynical enablers.

Interpreting Sunni-Shiite conflict as just another manifestation of a millennia-old conflict repeats a broadly essentialist position which tends to be the first resort every time ethnic or sectarian violence breaks out. Such approaches tend to focus on intrinsic, deeply rooted, and irreconcilable cultural differences between groups which can always pose a risk of escalation to violence (think Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, which supposedly convinced Bill Clinton of the inevitability of Yugoslav ethnic slaughters). Evidence of decades of coexistence or intermarriage rarely impresses proponents of an essentialist approach. These differences might be latent for long periods of time, but given the opportunity — electoral mobilization, state failure, sudden explosions of local violence — people will tend to fall back on these deep identities. Such arguments tend to lead toward solutions involving the heavy hand of authoritarian states to suppress these supposedly inevitable violent tendencies, or toward partition into ethnic enclaves if state collapse has gone too far.

That's just what authoritarian regimes would like us to believe. But much more frequently, ethnic or sectarian violence is driven by either regimes themselves or by elites who cynically exploit identity for their political

aims. These leaders might or might not truly believe in these differences, but they are perfectly happy to take advantage of them when it suits their goals. Often, it is the authoritarian regimes themselves that are most responsible for stoking and shaping the identity divisions. The Saudi regime, most obviously, systematically uses sectarianism in order to intimidate and control its own Shiite citizens at home and to combat Iranian influence regionally. Saudi leaders may or may not genuinely hate Shiites, but they know that sectarian conflict is a useful strategy. In Egypt, the Mubarak regime tolerated significant levels of intimidation and attacks on Coptic Christian citizens, while Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government actively stokes the demonization of Islamists to generate support for the new military regime. In Iraq, a stronger state under the control of Nouri al-Maliki is too easily used to protect Shiite privilege and repress Sunni opponents. Strong states are often the problem, not the solution.

The strategic mobilization of identity politics typically involves some common moves. Electoral systems can be designed to maximize sectarian or ethnic competition, force voters into identity-defined voting blocs, and hinder cross-identity coalition formation. Discrimination in state institutions, military recruitment, and patronage can entrench hostility along particular lines and not others. For sectarian entrepreneurs from Slobodan Milosevic to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to triumph, intermarried families must be ripped apart, the possibility of coexistence undermined, and moderate counterparts knocked down in favor of more frightening extremists. Televised slaughter, rumors of sectarian or ethnic targeting, and the wide circulation of hostile rhetoric are a benefit, not an unfortunate side product of their efforts.

Often, the real purpose of such strategic identity mobilization is intra-group competition, as ambitious leaders see sectarian or ethnic extremism as a useful way to attack their political rivals as weak, naïve, or duplicitous. Attacking Shiites is often a product of competition among different Sunni factions as much as it is driven by larger religious struggles. More venom is often directed toward moderates within one's own group than toward the

putative enemy; as the dwindling cohort of true Egyptian liberals can attest, anyone who might try to seek the middle ground and critique both sides will be viciously shouted down. That, in turn, pushes more and more people to either silently accept or even to vocally repeat the mythologies supporting this mobilized identity, no matter how absurd.

Uncertainty, fear, economic hardship, and violence often create the toxic conditions for identity mobilization to gain traction. It's endlessly useful to demagogues and dictators to have some minority to blame for problems, to deflect outrage from their own failures, and to bind an otherwise fractious community together against a common enemy. And that's where the proliferation and entrenchment of sectarian rhetoric over the previous decade have been especially destructive. The sectarian incitement which pollutes official and private media outlets alike, and which floods through politicized mosques and religious networks, provides the master frame which increasingly makes sense to people who a decade ago would have angrily waved such rhetoric away. And after a decade of civil war in Iraq and propaganda about an Iranian-led "Shiite Crescent" threatening the Sunni Muslim world, those narratives are now deeply entrenched and hard to change. Language and terms that once sounded exotic and strange now find wide public circulation and resonance.

The Arab uprisings introduced such uncertainty and fear not only within countries such as Syria, but across the entire region, as do recent memories of very real slaughters, displacements, and outrages — such as those that have scarred Iraq. Syria provided endless opportunity for local entrepreneurs to use sectarian language and imagery to build support and raise money for the insurgency. Increasingly polarized, insular media clusters within which only information supportive of sectarian narratives tends to circulate, reinforces and intensifies identity conflicts with every YouTube video. And those atrocities have been experienced vicariously across the region, with Egyptian or Tunisian Sunnis identifying with the suffering of their Syrian or Iraqi counterparts even if they did not themselves have much direct contact with Shiites.

Highlighting the role of cynical politicians in the mobilization of identity conflict points to very different policy advice, of course. Fighting sectarianism thus requires changing the incentives and the opportunities for such political mobilization. Were electoral rules changed, official media and state institutions purged of sectarian language, and hate speech and incitement punished rather than encouraged, identity entrepreneurs would suffer political defeat. Elites who want to cynically manipulate sectarianism need to have the raw material with which to work or the right conditions within which to work their evil magic. Taking the oxygen out of the room is not impossible: Kuwait, for instance, turned away from sectarianism in its last elections, in part as the costs of such conflict began to really sink in.

But such political responses to identity conflict become far more difficult after they have been successfully mobilized — especially under conditions of state failure, uncertainty, violence, and fear. It is far easier to generate sectarian animosities than it is to calm them down. This ratcheting effect is the reason for the deepest concern about the trends of the last few years. Identity entrepreneurs may think that they can turn the hatred on and off as it suits their interests, but at some point these identities become self-sustaining and internalized. Blood matters, a lot: There will be no reconciliation in Iraq or Syria for a long time, not with so many individuals who have watched people they love slaughtered or raped or displaced over their ascribed

identities. How could anyone expect an Iraqi Sunni to forgive or happily coexist with Shiite neighbors who only recently killed his children because of their religion? Those memories are only reinforced by the endlessly circulating videos and images which today provide unavoidable documentation of additional atrocities. Even ending the violence and restoring a modicum of stability in Syria, Iraq, or Bahrain is not likely to erase these inflamed hatreds and memories, leaving well-fertilized terrain for the next identity entrepreneur who comes along.

The political approach to sectarianism makes painfully clear that it did not have to be like this. Sectarian conflict is not the natural response to the fall of a strongman. The Bahraini activists who demanded political reform and human rights did not have to be tarred as Iranian assets and smeared as Shiite separatists. Syrian non-violent activists could have developed and enforced a compelling vision of a non-sectarian post-Assad alternative. Gulf Islamists and regimes could have opted not to use sectarianism to generate support for the Syrian insurgency. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its enemies could have opted for cooperation and inclusion rather than spiraling polarization and confrontation. But this approach also offers little optimism about the future. The painful reality is that sectarianism proved too useful to too many powerful actors, and too compelling a narrative in a violent, turbulent, and uncertain time, to be avoided.



Sectarianism in the Gulf

Sectarianism after the Saudi mosque bombings

By Toby Matthiesen, May 29, 2015

Just seven days after one of the deadliest bombings Saudi Arabia has witnessed in years, yet another explosion at a Shiite mosque in the country's Eastern Province killed at least four people. On May 29, an attacker detonated his car full of explosives in front of the al-Anoud Mosque in Dammam City.

On May 22, Saleh al-Qashami, a Saudi citizen, blew himself up in the Shiite Imam Ali mosque in the village of Qadeeh in the Qatif oasis, a predominantly Shiite area. It was the deadliest attack on Saudi Shiites ever, killing 21 people and severely wounding dozens of others. Moreover, the attack took place during Friday prayers, implying that the attacker did not consider the worshippers Muslims. While anti-Shiite voices across the region were quick to blame Iran or Hezbollah, the Islamic State quickly claimed that a "soldier of the caliphate" had carried out the May 22 attack.

The official statement was signed by Islamic State-Najd Province, implying that the Islamic State now has an official branch in Saudi Arabia's central Najd Province. The group declared the start of a campaign to rid the Arabian Peninsula of "all the polytheists." Within hours, the Islamic State-Najd Province also claimed the May 29 attack in Dammam, adding that it was another step in its campaign to "purify" Saudi Arabia from the rejectionists.

The bombings have raised a number of important questions regarding the ability of Saudi Arabia to protect its citizens, the reach of the Islamic State in Saudi Arabia, the future of Sunni-Shiite relations and the double-edged sword of state-sponsored anti-Shiism in the country.

These were the second and third attacks on Saudi Shiites claimed by the Islamic State. During the first, in November 2014, a Saudi gunman opened fire with an automatic weapon as worshippers were leaving a Shiite mourning house, or *hussainiyya*, in the al-Ahsa oasis, the other main area of Shiite population in the country. While the attacker

and several dozen co-conspirators were quickly arrested and many across the country showed their sympathy and attended the funeral, there were few tangible changes. The advisory Shura Council debated a bill criminalizing sectarian hate speech in the months after the attack but no action was taken.

Although the late King Abdullah began cautiously reaching out to the Shiites when he took the throne in 2005, King Salman has made few such overtures since coming to power in January. Salman instead started a war in neighboring Yemen against the Houthi rebels and the forces aligned with former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh. At home, the new king has reached out to conservative forces from across the Sunni spectrum, including clerics who had been critical of Abdullah and Saudi foreign policy, in particular its anti-Muslim Brotherhood campaign.

At the start of the bombing campaign in Yemen, the most important Sunni clerics, such as Salman al-Awda, praised the new leadership and the war against the Houthis, with some going as far as calling the campaign a just, religious war. The war has been presented as an effort to counter Iran – the Saudis are thoroughly convinced that the Houthis are Iranian proxies – and by default counter Shiite movements, although the Zaydi Shiites in Yemen are different from Iran's Twelver Shiites and many Zaydi religious practices and beliefs are close to the Sunnis.

The increased anti-Shiite rhetoric since the start of the war has had a negative impact on the Shiites in Saudi Arabia and sectarian relations. Not many Saudis have spoken out against the war, seemingly out of fear of persecution, criticism of the government can lead to several years in jail. However, many Saudis, in particular many Shiites and Southerners, have appeared to be against the war. For example, a planned anti-war demonstration in the eastern town of Awwamiyya was canceled after activists were

allegedly told they would all be shot if they demonstrated. The impact of the war has been even worse in southern Saudi Arabia, particularly Najran Province, an area historically settled by Ismailis, who the Wahhabi clerics term “rejectionists” and who have also faced sectarian discrimination. Though the Ismailis are better integrated into state institutions, including the armed forces, the war on their doorsteps and the shelling of Najran from across the border coupled with the anti-Shiite rhetoric of the war, is likely unsettling.

The bombing in Qatif reignited the debate about the problem of the Shiites in Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia’s religious politics. Al-Ahsa, where the November 2014 attack took place, is a mixed Sunni and Shiite area, but Qatif and the surrounding villages are mainly Shiite with a long history of oppositional politics. Since February 2011, a protest movement inspired by the Arab uprisings and the protests in neighbouring Bahrain has challenged the notion that Saudi Arabia was exempt from the Arab uprisings. Initially focusing on the release of political prisoners, national democratic reforms and human rights, the protest movement faced increasing repression, leading parts of the movement to turn toward militancy. Saudi security forces, which also suffered casualties in frequent shootouts, shot more than 25, mainly young, Shiite men. The figurehead of the protest movement, the cleric Nimr al-Nimr, was arrested in the summer of 2012 and sentenced to death, a verdict that could be executed at any time.

The protest movement has slowed since 2014, mainly due to repression, activist fatigue and lack of support from other parts of the country and pro-government Shiite factions. However, the funeral for the victims of the May 22 attack turned into a massive rally with hundreds of thousands of participants. Official Saudi media gave full coverage to the funeral, emphasizing calls for an end to sectarian violence – seemingly in a bid to prevent the appropriation of the funeral by opposition media channels. Saudi newspapers reported the funeral on their front pages, stating that half a million had attended and reprinting King Salman’s statement that he was “heartbroken,” and his promises to hunt down those responsible.

At the same time, however, many Shiites, and particularly those close to the victims, feel betrayed and let down by the state and are fearful of more attacks. They are surprised that more was not done since the al-Ahsa attack to prevent similar bloodshed. Unlike al-Ahsa, Qatif and the surrounding areas have been full of checkpoints since 2011 to prevent the militarization of and hunt down those involved in the Shiite protest movement, known locally as *al-hirak* (the movement). Dammam, a city built during at the start of oil exploration in the mid-20th century, is a mainly Sunni city with a significant Shiite minority. Therefore, the Shia mosque in Dammam was even easier to reach than the mosque in Qatif. Sunni hard-liners had for decades demanded the closure of Shiite mosques in mixed Sunni-Shiite cities such as Dammam and Khobar. The state at times followed through and closed several Shiite mosques in Khobar over the last years.

The leader of Khat al-Imam, a pro-Iranian social movement that had been active in the Eastern Province since the 1980s, Abd al-Karim al-Hubayl, and other senior Saudi Shiite clerics have called for the establishment of popular protection committees to prevent future attacks. A newly established Twitter account is circulating pictures of men in orange vests from the committees stopping and checking cars and monitoring people at the entrances of mosques, as well as female patrols in the streets. The Shiite clerics argue that if the state could not protect the Shiites, they should take matters into their own hands. That these committees share a name – al-Hashd al-Shaabi – the militias recently established in Iraq to counter the Islamic State, was not lost on locals and outside observers. The committees’ actions constitute a direct threat to state’s monopoly of violence. Pro-Saudi Twitter accounts have been quick to denounce these committees as the beginning militarization of the Qatifis, using the hashtag “No to the Shiite Committees in Qatif,” replacing *shaabi* (popular) with *shii* (Shiite).

Fear among the Shiite population is understandable given the Islamic State – Najd Province’s declaration and the recent attacks. The Islamic State and similar organizations aim to cause a rise in Shiite militancy and increase distrust

between the Shiites on the one hand and the state and the rest of Saudi society on the other hand. In many ways, the Shiites are a soft target for the Islamic State, easier to target than foreigners holed up in their fortified compounds, and less controversial amongst mainstream Saudi society than attacks on Sunni Saudi soldiers and policemen. The Islamic State can feed on decades of anti-Shiite incitement in Saudi schools, Islamic universities and the media. Indeed, many of the militants that join the uprisings in Syria and the insurgency in Iraq are driven by a desire to counter Iranian and Shiite influence, foreign policy goals that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are also working towards.

Saudi Arabia may have to choose between using anti-Shiism as a political tool at home and abroad and the very real threat that extremists taking anti-Shiism too seriously will bring the fight back home – with unpredictable consequences for the stability of Saudi Arabia and the wider region. If the new Saudi king wanted, he could enact a number of laws to curb sectarianism and reaffirm that the Shiites are citizens of Saudi Arabia not just “other Saudis” or secondary citizens. He could, for example, issue a law criminalizing sectarian hate speech as neighboring Kuwait has done. There were calls to close the Saudi offices of one particularly inflammatory sectarian TV channel, Wesal, but it remained active. Several Saudi Twitter accounts, including of some clerics, seemed sympathetic to the Qudaih attacker or spread conspiracy theories of the event.

King Salman could also abolish judicial discrimination against Shiites (which currently require two Shiite witnesses to counter claims by one Sunni witness), strengthen Shiite status law courts and appoint a Shiite cleric to the Council of Senior Ulema, the highest religious body in the country. He could also appoint Shiite ministers (no Shiite has ever reached ministerial rank in the history of the country), ambassadors (there has been only one Shiite ambassador, and that was to Iran) or local governors in the Eastern Province. He could also revise the textbooks on *tawhid*, which all Saudi students including Shiites and Ismailis must study and which denounces Shiites as rejectionists. He could also release political prisoners, jailed for demanding political reform and human rights. He could also start recruiting Shiites into the Ministry of Interior, the army and the National Guard, institutions from which they are largely barred.

All of these measures might be unpopular with some Saudis, particularly anti-Shiite clerics; however, without implementing some changes the “problem” of the Shiites in Saudi Arabia will not be resolved. Surely these attacks could serve as good an opportunity as any to reverse some of the sectarian policies that have driven many young Saudis into jihad abroad and at home in the first place.

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Sectarianism comes back to bite Saudi Arabia

By Toby Matthiesen, November 18, 2014

On Oct. 15, Nimr al-Nimr, a Saudi Arabian Shiite cleric, was sentenced to death by the Special Criminal Court in Riyadh. Since 2011, Nimr has become the figurehead of a protest movement centered in eastern Saudi Arabia that has been largely denied coverage by mainstream media. The sentencing has implications far beyond Nimr's personal fate. The Saudi crackdown is important because it has set a precedent for how the kingdom deals with political dissent and not just because it is another example of Saudi anti-Shiism.

The timing of the sentence is puzzling. Saudi decision-making works in myriad ways. Some observers feel that Nimr's death sentence is intended to show the Sunni population that alongside a number of long prison sentences issued against Sunnis who had supported Islamic State militants or al-Qaeda, the government is also being tough on Shiites. But this sectarian logic only further entrenches divisions and hostilities that have fueled the rise of extremist Islamic groups and the regional sectarian war.

The Saudi-sponsored doctrinal and strategic anti-Shiism has recently backfired at home, too. On Nov. 3, one day before Ashura, one of the holiest days in the Shiite Muslim calendar, Sunni militants opened fire on a crowd leaving a Shiite prayer hall in the al-Ahsa oasis in eastern Saudi Arabia. Several Shiites were killed, including a number of minors, and scores wounded. While the Shiites in Saudi Arabia experience institutional and religious discrimination, the state's security forces had hitherto protected them against attacks by Sunni militants. Al-Qaeda and its various offshoots had for years planned attacks on Shiites in the Eastern Province, aiming to increase sectarian tensions in the kingdom and possibly provoke armed retaliation from the Shiites. Several such plots, including one believed to have been targeting senior Shiite cleric Hassan al-Saffar, were foiled in the past.

All official organs of the state, including the official clergy, were quick to denounce the Nov. 3 attack, and within a few days the security forces had hunted down the perpetrators, killing several of them while suffering casualties themselves. This was seen as a sign that the state would not tolerate sectarian violence within its borders. Many Sunnis also declared their support for Sunni-Shiite coexistence in al-Ahsa on social media and attended the funeral for those killed during the attack.

However, the Saudi state and the religious establishment have for decades fueled sectarian animosities across the region. Saudi recruits for al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group are often motivated by a desire to contain Shiism and stem Iranian influence in the region – strategic objectives that Saudi media perpetuates ad infinitum. Anti-Shiite (and anti-Christian and anti-Jewish) incitement is spread across the region by Saudi-based television channels. It was encouraging that immediately after the attacks the long-standing Saudi Minister of Information Abdel Aziz Khoja announced the closure of perhaps the worst of those TV stations, Wisal. But in a sign that factions within the Saudi regime are divided over how to deal with the Shiites and with Sunni extremism in the kingdom, the minister was dismissed the next day, and Wisal, which retains some popularity in Saudi Arabia and the wider region, is still up and running.

Nimr's political role is rooted in a long tradition of Shiite activism, which goes back to the foundation of the Saudi kingdom, and which has led to the establishment of Shiite Islamist movements since the 1970s. He hails from a prominent family from Awamiya, a relatively poor Shiite village surrounded by date farms outside of Qatif, the largest Shiite city in Saudi Arabia. Awamiya has a long history of resistance to the Saudi monarchy. Indeed, Nimr's grandfather led an armed revolt in 1929-1930 against Saudi tax collectors and Wahhabi missionaries, who were sent

to the Eastern Province after the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz bin Saud, conquered it in 1913.

Awamiya was also one of the centers of the Shiite uprising in 1979 that was inspired by the Iranian Revolution. Nimr became politicized during these events and joined the Shirazi movement, which had started the uprising. The Shirazi movement was a transnational Shiite political organization led by the Iraqi-Iranian cleric Muhammad Mahdi al-Shirazi, but the bulk of its supporters were Shiite Muslims from the Persian Gulf states (mainly Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia). Nimr enrolled in the movement's religious school (hawza) in Iran and then became a teacher in the movement's hawza in Sayyida Zeinab, the suburb of the Syrian capital of Damascus that became a key transnational hub for Shiite pilgrims, students and activists.

By the early 1990s, the Saudi members of the Shirazi movement negotiated a political settlement with the Saudi government and accepted a general amnesty offered by then-King Fahd in return for the halt of their oppositional activities. A number of opposition activists, however, and particularly a group of religious clerics led by Nimr, opposed the amnesty agreement because they thought that the Saudi state was not fundamentally altering the subaltern status of the Shiites. And while Nimr returned to Saudi Arabia together with the other activists after 1993, his rejection of the 1993 agreement came to define his rivalry with the more accommodationist group in the Shirazi movement, represented by al-Saffar.

Nimr nonetheless remained a rather marginal figure throughout the 2000s, as King Abdullah tried to reach out to the Shiites and included some in the representative institutions of the Saudi state. But as regional sectarian tensions and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry intensified, and with renewed Shiite protests in the Eastern Province in 2009, many young Saudi Shiites came to admire Nimr's fiery sermons because of his direct criticism of the state's anti-democratic and anti-Shiite foundations. In one of his most famous sermons, he seemed to argue that the Shiites might one day secede if they could not realize their political

demands within the borders of the Saudi state. Shortly afterward, Nimr went into hiding to avoid arrest and only reemerged in 2011 as the uprisings in neighboring Bahrain and in the Saudi Eastern Province gained pace.

Nimr was the only Saudi Shiite cleric to unanimously support both the protests in Bahrain and the protests that had erupted across the Eastern Province. His former colleagues in the Shirazi movement, such as al-Saffar, were much more cautious and at times even urged the youth to stay at home to not further inflame the situation (all forms of public protest are banned in Saudi Arabia).

Therefore, Nimr became the main figurehead of the protest movement centered on Awamiya and Qatif. But given the harsh repression leashed out against the demonstrators (more than 20 young men have been killed by security forces in the Eastern Province since 2011) and the lack of support from other regions of Saudi Arabia, the protests eventually fizzled out. Though, in July 2012, police shot Nimr in the leg and arrested him, sparking renewed mass protests. Since 2013, however, the protests have again become smaller, and it is therefore a surprise to many that the Saudi judiciary would now issue a death sentence against Nimr, a move that has reinvigorated the protest movement and further inflamed sectarian tensions in the region and beyond.

While the sentence can be rejected by King Abdullah, or commuted into a lengthy prison sentence, it is not certain that this will happen. Human rights organizations point out that the evidence that led to this judgment is mainly based on Nimr's sermons, and he therefore has to be considered a prisoner of conscience. Nimr supported the right of the people to choose their own government and called for the downfall of the Saudi ruling family. In a highly unusual move for a Shiite cleric, he also supported the uprising against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. And while Nimr repeatedly called upon the local youth to be ready to die as martyrs, he urged them not to "return bullets with bullets" but to instead use peaceful means such as demonstrations and civil disobedience instead.

The verdict also mentions Nimr’s association with “wanted terrorists,” a reference to a list of 23 men who are wanted for their roles in the protests since 2011 and for allegedly attacking security forces. Several of those men have been killed in the last two years in shootouts that activists say resemble government-approved assassinations. His death sentence is just one of a number of extremely harsh sentences against people involved in the protest movement. Several other Saudi Shiites were also sentenced to death, among them a nephew of Nimr, who was 17 years old at the time of his arrest.

While Nimr had already been an iconic figure for Shiite Muslims in the Gulf, and protests in solidarity with him had repeatedly been held in Bahrain, after the last verdict he has become a household name among Shiites across the world. If he is executed, the Gulf Shiites will have a martyr that symbolizes their struggle against oppression, and some of his supporters will want revenge. Indeed, Shiite hardliners, from Lebanese Hezbollah to Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, have said that Saudi Arabia would cross a red line if Nimr is executed, and most major Ayatollahs have called for his release.

The bottom line remains that within a few weeks, a key Saudi Shiite cleric has been sentenced to death in an unfair trial and a group of Sunni militants were able to kill Shiites in a house of worship on the eve of Ashura. It is hard to see how Shiite Muslims should feel safe and accepted in a state where anti-Shiism is perpetuated in schooling and public discourse and such atrocities are allowed to happen. The recent killings have confirmed the truism that Gulf Arab support for sectarian hate speech and militias abroad would one day backfire, and they have set a worrying precedent. Parts of the Saudi ruling family may finally feel that their long-standing association with the Wahhabi religious establishment and radical anti-Shiite groups in the region may have been a strategic mistake. But these ties are ties that bind, and they are difficult to undo. After decades of using anti-Shiism as a strategic tool at home and abroad it will be virtually impossible to backtrack without alienating the core constituencies of the Saudi regime. And so the contradictions within the Saudi political system, and the regional sectarian war, are likely to get worse rather than better in the foreseeable future.

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The limits of the ‘sectarian’ framing in Yemen

By Stacey Philbrick Yadav, September 25, 2014

It was 2005 when my Yemeni friends first started talking seriously about their fears that the Houthis would march on the capital of Sanaa. The Houthis were never closer than the nearby province of Amran back then. There was a media blackout, and most of our information came from journalist friends who were in and around the city of Saada, then the center of the conflict, distributing news via SMS. Information was not the only thing the regime of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh sought (and failed) to control: Humanitarian agencies had no way to reach the civilians who were bearing the brunt of the conflict between government forces and Houthi militants. In a harbinger of things to come, a UNICEF employee told me that the only way he could get supplies to Saada was by partnering with the Islah Charitable Society (ICS), a local aid agency tied to Yemen’s largest Islamist party. He complained that ICS was padding the books and inflating the numbers of people who had been displaced to gain resources for its wider evangelical work, but he noted that it was the only non-governmental agency that he knew of that was granted a permit to work amid the stranded civilians. It was in ways like this that the Saleh regime manipulated the “sectarian” politics of Northern Yemen, seeking to ensure that the two groups were too distracted by each other to turn their attention elsewhere.

That, of course, was not a wholly successful strategy. Over the past decade, there have been at least half a dozen military campaigns with the Houthis, a secessionist movement in the South, the relocation of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) from Saudi Arabia to Yemen, a popular uprising that lasted 11 months, a fracturing of the armed forces, an externally-brokered transitional agreement, a dramatic escalation in U.S. drone attacks in different parts of the country, and a National Dialogue Conference theoretically designed to put all the pieces back together. So, why think of this as sectarian war? The Houthi’s march on Sanaa in September cannot be easily glossed as “sectarian” just because they are Zaydi Shiites,

and most (though not all) Islahis are Sunnis. The existence of nominal difference is not by itself a compelling causal story.

The fact that the Houthis are Zaydis does not mean that their movement is aimed exclusively or even primarily at establishing a Zaydi political order, reinstating the kind of imamate that ruled Northern Yemen for hundreds of years (though some critics will tell you so). Similarly, the fact that Islah’s membership is predominantly Sunni doesn’t mean it is working to reestablish the caliphate, or even that it is willing to cooperate with those transnational movements that would, though its detractors may allege this. Instead, the conflict that pits the Houthis against Islah is one several decades in the making, and rests as much in the structure of the Yemeni North, the hierarchies of power and privilege among Zaydis themselves, and a state apparatus that sought to manipulate them.

Charles Schmitz recently contributed an excellent overview of the development of the Houthi movement as a political force. Additionally, the work of anthropologists like Gabrielle von Bruck and Shelagh Weir on the cultural politics of Zaydi/Islahi tension in the North is useful. While their field research mainly predates the Houthi movement as such, it outlines the dislocating impact of republican ideology in the North from the 1970s, and two interrelated developments that form a subtext to the current conflict. In “Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen: Ruling Families in Transition,” Von Bruck maps the ways in which Hashemites (descendants of the Prophet, from whom Zaydi leaders have historically been chosen) were maligned as “feudal” by new republican leaders and the ways in which Sanaani Hashemite families consequently worked to refashion central Zaydi religious precepts as supportive of constitutional rule and accountable governance, fitting religious concepts into the discourse of the developing state. Weir’s book, “A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen,” documents the efforts of Sunni

evangelists (who would ultimately align with Islah) to make use of this republican critique of hierarchy to recruit or “convert” low-status Zaydis in the far North, biting in to the core Zaydi demographic base. As constitutional checks on presidential authority and more general political accountability were undermined by Saleh in Sanaa and his regime supported the expansion of Islah-oriented schools to advance Sunni recruitment in the North, these new Hashemite discourses of accountability became more evidently oppositional. The residue of this ideological refashioning is evident in the Houthi project.

So when I say that this conflict can’t be glossed as sectarian, I don’t mean to suggest that religious conviction is irrelevant to the Houthi movement or its relationship to Islah or to the Yemeni government. Instead, it is important to investigate the *meaning* of “sectarian” concepts of good governance and opposition to corruption, and question whether these are (or, more to the point, are not) consistent with existing institutions and governing practices by Yemen’s transitional government.

It took a decade for the Houthis to march on Sanaa, but before they did so, they also sat in its square, participating in a broad-based social movement that called itself the “Change Revolution.” Easily forgotten is that they did so alongside many members of Islah. Over the 11 months of Yemen’s popular uprising, Houthis and Islahis managed to cooperate on a number of issues, particularly outside of top leadership circles. In the year that followed, Houthis and Islahis were co-participants in workshops for Yemeni youth, where they disagreed on principled grounds, but also carved out spaces of agreement on core issues. To be clear, this was not an easy relationship, but it was also not one characterized by implacable sectarian animus.

The transitional agreement brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council and endorsed by the United Nations as the blueprint for a new Yemen included provisions that overrepresented Islah and excluded the Houthis from the transitional “national unity” government. It did little to address key anti-corruption demands central to Houthi and non-Houthi protesters alike. It also deferred essential

transitional justice mechanisms that might have brought redress for the brutality of past military campaigns against the Houthis and civilians in the North. It moved instead to a direct (and uncontested) presidential election of someone close to ousted president Saleh and to a National Dialogue Conference that further overrepresented Islah, even while cementing the importance of the Houthi conflict as one of the key questions facing the country.

So when the Houthis marched on the capital – a march that was not entirely military, but also included large-scale, nonviolent mobilization of protesters in the weeks that preceded it – there was no reason to interpret this as a march on Sunnis, sectarian rhetoric notwithstanding. Instead, it appears to be a campaign to target Islahis as major contenders for institutional power, designed as a renegotiation of the transitional framework. Islahi media outlets like Suhail TV have been taken off the air (though it appears that the main Houthi Web site may have been hacked by Suhail viewers). The homes of prominent Islahis have been seized or destroyed, as has the home of General Ali Muhsin, who oversaw the bulk of the military campaigns against the Houthis over the past decade, and later defected to the opposition during the 2011 uprising. It appears that his troops bore the brunt of the conflict with the Houthis in September, while President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi ordered troops from other commands to stand down.

The ceasefire agreement, rich in detail and very quickly agreed, focuses primarily on renegotiating powersharing to increase the representation of Houthis (and the Southern Movement, also a thorn in Islah’s side), and to outline concrete benchmarks for anti-corruption and economic reforms. It calls for the quick establishment of a technocratic committee of economic advisers whose recommendations will be binding on the new government. It is not focused on the kind of “culture war” issues that might characterize a sectarian conflict, but rather seeks to achieve several genuinely popular reforms sidelined by the transitional government. That it was accomplished at the point of a gun speaks as much to the failures of the transitional framework as to Houthi ideology. Widespread

dissatisfaction with slow progress of the transitional process may help to explain why so many foreign actors have been quick to support its renegotiation by backing the ceasefire terms.

Worrisome for the medium term stability of Sanaa, however, is the question of Hadi's relationship to the Houthis. The earliest ceasefire benchmark for a new government has already passed, suggesting that all may not proceed smoothly. While the Houthis may have helped to conveniently clip the wings of Yemen's largest Islamist party in ways that help Hadi consolidate his own position, now that the deed is done, how long before he decides that the Houthis are more trouble than they are worth? After all, as vice president, Hadi was at former president

Saleh's knee when he first used Islah to hem in the Yemeni Socialist Party, and then turned on Islah itself in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The Houthis will need to quickly cultivate allies from other corners of the political field if they are to avoid a repetition of that storied past. Their window for credibly doing so becomes narrower as each benchmark is delayed.

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How sectarianism shapes Yemen's war

By Jeff Colgan, April 13, 2015

Saudi Arabia and Egypt are mounting a military intervention in the ongoing civil war in Yemen. They have been here before: In the 1960s, both countries intervened in the fight between North and South Yemen. However, 50 years ago, they were on opposite sides of the conflict; now they are on the same side. The switch says much about current Middle East politics and how we should understand the politics of alliances generally.

Some analysts argue that the violence in Yemen is not sectarian. That's partially true, if one looks only within Yemen: The Houthi rebels are a heterodox Shiite group, but they have fought alongside Sunnis against the incumbent government. Locally, this is mostly a political contest for power. But if we look at the broader Middle East to see how foreign governments are aligning and intervening, it is impossible to miss the sectarian divide. Sunni governments, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are

backing President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who is Sunni, whereas Shiite governments, such as Iran and Iraq, as well as non-state groups, like Hezbollah, support the largely Shiite rebels.

The sectarian nature of today's rivalries in the Middle East contrasts sharply with the last time Egypt and Saudi Arabia intervened in a Yemeni civil war. In the 1960s, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser led a pan-Arab nationalist movement that threatened the legitimacy of monarchies like Saudi Arabia. Egypt, along with Iraq and other Arab republics, supported North Yemen. Saudi Arabia and other monarchies, including Iran (which was a monarchy at the time), helped the royalists in South Yemen. Just like today, Yemen's battle was part of the larger political contest in the Middle East – but now the central cleavage has switched from regime type to sectarian identity.

Why has sectarianism become activated in ways that make it matter so much more than it did before? Part of the answer involves recent wars in Iraq and Syria. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 not only reversed the domestic balance of power between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, but it also unleashed insurgencies that deepened the sectarian divide across the region. The Islamic State has capitalized on and contributed to such division. In Syria, myriad rebel groups fighting President Bashar al-Assad have competed for funding and support from foreign donors. Sunni regimes have mostly funded Sunni fighters, while Iran supported Shiite fighters, including Hezbollah.

The last decade has deepened the sectarian divide, but it was politically activated much earlier, in a contest between rival narratives of legitimacy. In the 1960s and 70s, the Saudi government wanted to use pan-Islamism to counter Nasser's pan-Arabism. When oil revenues boomed following 1973, the Gulf monarchies poured money into mosques and organizations like the World Muslim League. The influx of oil money came just at the wrong moment, when leaders and elites were looking for ways to politicize Islam. The Saudis later regretted that strategy after the Iranian revolution took pan-Islamism in a new anti-royalist direction. Paradoxically, this only drove the Saudis to burnish their own Islamic credentials more brightly, even restyling their king as the "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia set in motion an even deeper fissure between Sunnis and Shiites.

The greater relevance of religious sectarianism today teaches us to avoid not one but two common ways of looking at Middle East politics. On one hand, many analysts and policymakers need to downgrade the importance they attribute to religion. Some analysts are arguing that the current sectarianism reflects "ancient hatreds," thereby implying they are permanent and immutable. Yet most scholars reject the idea of ancient hatreds, arguing instead that sectarianism is a latent factor that can become politically activated by elites or circumstances. The remarkable political realignment in the parties intervening in Yemen, comparing 50 years ago to today, demonstrates that sectarian divides are not always

a salient feature of politics. Indeed, the dramatic change in the course of a single lifetime illustrates the political malleability of sectarianism.

On the other hand, scholars of international relations should upgrade their estimate of the importance of religion, for alliance politics and much else. A whole generation of policymakers and scholars learned from Stephen Walt's seminal book on the origin of alliances. Walt argued that certain things matter for the balance of threat – such as geography, offensive capabilities and threat perceptions – while others, such as ideology, do not. The book is silent on religion. Religion is certainly ideational if not ideological, which suggests that our understanding of alignments needs updating. This will not surprise specialists on religion and politics, such as Ron Hassner, Stacie Goddard and Thomas Hegghammer, but most scholars probably need to update their mental model to better account for ideational factors like religion.

Finding a middle ground between these two views of religion in politics requires nuanced understanding. In today's Middle East, activated sectarianism affects the political cost of alliances, making them easier between co-religionists. That helps explain why Sunni-majority states are lining up against Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah over Yemen. Still, the sectarian rhetoric lies on the surface of what is a deeper and long-running conflict about regime legitimacy, what one commentator calls a battle between "Muslim monarchical rule and Muslim republicanism." Some Sunni but republican states, like Pakistan, are resisting Saudi Arabia's attempt to use sectarianism for regional alignments.

U.S. policymakers can see instability in Yemen and elsewhere in one of two ways. The first is as a sudden, violent upsurge of underlying sectarian hatred. The better way is to understand sectarianism as an instrument in a long-running regional contest between rival narratives of regime legitimacy. This understanding should shape foreign responses to regional events. Rare, individual security threats might call for a U.S. military response, but over the long run the situation calls for a different

approach. Only local participants can resolve the contest over regime legitimacy. The United States will do damage by intervening too heavy-handedly.

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Sectarianism and authoritarianism in Kuwait

By Madeleine Wells, April 13, 2015

The prominent Kuwaiti Shiite lawyer and former member of parliament Khaled al-Shatti was arrested April 2 after posting tweets critical of the Saudi-led Arab coalition's fight against the Houthis in Yemen. His tweets suggested that the Houthis – Yemeni Shiite rebels supported though not controlled by Iran – are growing in power.

Shatti, who was released on bail April 6, was charged with challenging the emir, demoralizing Kuwaiti soldiers, offending the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and threatening Saudi relations with Kuwait.

His Twitter protest is not the only evidence of discord against Kuwait's foreign policy. Seven out of Kuwait's 10 Shiite parliamentarians (in a body of 50) also criticized the Kuwaiti Air Force's participation in Saudi Arabia's "Operation Decisive Storm," on the grounds that it violates Kuwait's constitutional prohibition on offensive war.

Their outspoken protest is unusual and telling: The Shiite MPs of Kuwait are the only such group in the region empowered by a positive legacy of regime-minority relations to take a stand against their government's foreign policy on an official, institutional level. This level of activism is nonetheless surprising even by Kuwaiti standards. A Kuwaiti political persona tweeting in favor of the Houthi rebels is shocking and out of the norm of

Shiite actions in Kuwait since the 1990s. And Shiite MPs taking a stand against the Saudi campaign on any grounds stands out as quite significant as compared to both the quiet Shiite activists in neighboring Saudi Arabia, who are worried about local sectarian backlash from the war on the Houthis rather than contesting the foreign policy itself, and the more bellicose response of Shiite political factions in Iraq, who have publicly protested the Saudi campaign and even had one MP offer to send fighters to defend Yemen.

Sectarianism has been getting worse in the Gulf, and many analysts generally conceive of this as an international process. Indeed, analysts have warned that a Saudi-led war on the Zaydi Shiite Houthis could devolve into a proxy war with Iran and further sectarianize the Middle East. The fact that Arab Sunni states have entered a coalition to fight a Shiite non-state actor in Yemen allegedly backed by Iran would, indeed, seem to be evidence of sectarianism. But sometimes what looks like sectarianism and regional ethnic hatreds is actually just good old domestic politics. As Marc Lynch argued in a 2013 Project on Middle East Political Science symposium, "The sectarian narrative radically exaggerates both the coherence of the 'Sunni' side of the conflict and the novelty of a long-standing power struggle with Iran. It is better understood as a justification for domestic repression and regional power

plays than as an explanation for Middle Eastern regimes' behavior." That perspective applies to Kuwait's new sectarian tensions as well.

My dissertation research – which addresses why governments change their policies toward non-core groups such as the Shiites of Kuwait – suggests that policies such as these political arrests actually have very little to do with their ethno-religious characteristics or even with the Iranian boogeyman's growing power in the Gulf. Instead, they are calculated based upon their oppositional potential. That is to say, it is not Kuwait's sectarianism that we must worry about, but rather its re-emerging authoritarianism. The crux of the issue is rentier Kuwait's semi-authoritarian political structure and the type of dynamic it engenders. As a semi-constitutional monarchy, the highly mobilized Kuwaiti body politic can vote in free and fair parliamentary elections, and the Kuwaiti parliament is unique in the Gulf for having the power to remove confidence in individual ministers and override the emir's veto via majority vote. At the same time, their choices are ultimately limited by an appointed cabinet that serves at the discretion of the emir. This situation leads to a dynamic in which the shape of the political opposition and the threat it poses to the ruler are variables of primary importance in how *any* societal groups, Sunni or Shiite are treated by their ruler.

The Shiites of Kuwait, who make up 25 to 30 percent of the population, have a unique place in national and regional history. Recent work by Fred Wehrey, Laurence Louer and Toby Matthiesen demonstrates how Kuwait has long stood out for having the most amicable sectarian relations in the Gulf, especially as compared to its neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. With very few exceptions – such as proportional access to mosques and staffing in high-level defense and interior positions – Kuwaiti Shiites have equal access to the large coterie of welfare benefits offered by the rentier state, including free health care, education, public sector jobs and state subsidized fuel and housing. They are nationalistic and loyal toward their government and feel central to the state's history and its quest for survival. As such, with the exception of the 1980s – when, inspired by the Iranian revolution, a small group of Kuwaiti Shiites

began to push for political reforms, including for Shiite equality, and were institutionally excluded and sometimes-violently repressed – Kuwaiti Shiites have most often been accommodated or co-opted by their government. The times when Kuwait did appear to be sectarian, it was usually doing so for reasons of managing political opposition.

In the 2000s, despite the perceived regional growth and threat of Iran's power after the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003, the Kuwaiti regime did not repress its Shiite citizens but instead offered them more religious accommodation. In many cases, the Sabah ruling family has continued to defend the confessional group against growing societal and parliamentary Islamist and tribal sectarianism. Only four years ago, when Saudi Arabia sent troops to Bahrain to aid the Bahraini government in suppressing its Shiite-led Arab Spring, the Kuwaiti government decided *not* to send ground forces. Rather, it ended up sending a largely symbolic naval force instead, likely because the emir was highly sensitive to how its participation might impact Shiite allies in the government. In 2012, the Shiites briefly held 17 seats in parliament, the highest number ever, as a result of an opposition boycott of elections. Likewise, Shiite MPs seem to know their place in Kuwaiti Politics. Even their recent protest against Kuwait joining the Saudi coalition was carefully framed in *constitutional* terms, demonstrating the extent to which they fear being perceived as going outside the norms of their political system.

What has changed since that would lead Kuwait to join with its Arab allies in a potentially controversial and sectarian cause that could rock the boat with its Shiite allies at home? The answer is that Kuwait, along with many of its neighbors, has become more authoritarian in the aftermath of the region-wide and domestic uprisings that started in late 2010. The ruling elites of the Sabah family are reeling from the cross-class Islamist-tribal-youth coalition that has only intensified its demands for political reform since the Arab Spring, in addition to intra-family factionalism and allegations of coup plotting. To deal with this situation, Kuwait has revived

some unique ways of stemming the ongoing opposition movement. In 2014, over 30 people were deported and stripped of their citizenship for supposedly undermining the country's security. Most recently, at least 18 people were reportedly arrested at an March 23 anti-government protest, including regional human rights defender Nawaf al-Hendal, who had addressed the United Nations Human Rights Council only three days earlier. Hendal has since been released but his case has been referred to Kuwait's Criminal Court.

More importantly, in the past few months it has become clear that there is not only a red line for Kuwaitis criticizing the emir, but a taboo on criticizing Kuwait's regional allies as well. Several other Kuwaitis who have criticized the Saudi regime or involved themselves in public domestic opposition campaigns have been targeted as well. Shatti was joined by Shiite writer and academic Salah al-Fadhli, who was also arrested for speaking out about Yemen. Another Shiite MP, Abdulhameed Dashti is awaiting trial for criticizing the Bahraini government, and former Sunni MP Mubarak al-Duweileh was questioned over his criticism of the rulers of Abu Dhabi. Kuwait is not out of the norm for suddenly prosecuting regional dissent – Bahrainis criticizing the Saudi campaign in Yemen were immediately arrested, too. This regional criminalization of dissent is something that has been facilitated by the Gulf Cooperation Council's Security Pact, which Kuwait was the last state to sign. The pact has given legal means for the persecuting of opposition forces all over the Gulf, ostensibly on security terms. As Madawi al-Rasheed explains, "Meant to enhance security for economic development and stability of GCC countries, the pact has now tuned into creating cross-border controls, evacuating the Arab Gulf of dissent and eliminating safe havens for dissidents of one country in another one."

The Kuwaiti crackdown on Sunni and Shiite dissent alike reveals that if anything, the regime *does* share a strong threat perception with the rest of the GCC, but that it perceives its biggest transnational threat not from Iran, but from the diffusion of democratic movements that may uproot its allied Gulf leaders. Indeed, Saudi

itself has partially framed the campaign on Yemen this way – emphasizing its intent to restore Yemen's elected president to power – in addition to rolling back ostensible Iranian gains in the region. The arrest of Shiites who speak publically about Saudi Arabia's Yemen campaign, as sectarian as it looks on a superficial level, must thus be seen within the overall context of the progressive tightening of domestic security by a continually stressed Kuwaiti regime.

In this light, regime-Shiite relations have more to do with how formidable the political opposition is becoming in the Gulf and the shared regional threat of empowered domestic constituents than any single other factor. It's not sectarianism, but authoritarianism. It is the internal threats to Gulf regimes like Kuwait, driven by their lack of meaningful reform in the last decade, that drives Gulf regimes to internationalize domestic problems in terms of "security" and sometimes "sect" (read: Iran) in order to distort and drive focus away from meaningful, local grievances. Regime treatment of Shatti for supporting the Houthi cause is one part of this larger authoritarian whole. Shatti's tweets were outside the bounds of what he was allowed to do as part of a co-opted minority with traditionally good relations to the ruler, but also what is expected of him as a citizen of a beleaguered semi-authoritarian regime. As such, he has been bluntly told to stay out of oppositional and regional politics and go back to his lane. As one Kuwaiti source told me about the incident, after Shatti's release, "He's out, but they are keeping him close." The question now is, will he and his co-sectarians stay there?

The answer is a bit of a catch 22. It depends on whether or not societal and regional anti-Shiite sentiment continues to burn from the spark the Saudis ignited. On the one hand, Kuwait's participation in the invasion of Yemen may be just the catalyst its Shiite citizens need to move away from their longstanding alliance with the Sabah family. The semi-authoritarian Kuwaiti system that gave them the same freedom to criticize Kuwaiti foreign policy in constitutional, legitimate terms may offer them the opening they need. This would mean an even

more formidable and further cross-cutting opposition to the Kuwaiti government and could perhaps augur for real political change. On the other hand, the Kuwaiti tribal-Islamist opposition has in the last decade become increasingly sectarian itself. This makes it likely the Shiites will continue to stand by the Kuwaiti regime in spite of their underlying disagreement with its foreign

policies and lack of reform because they have no other alternative source of protection. In this sense, Saudi-driven sectarianism in the region seems to have inadvertently reinforced Kuwaiti authoritarianism as well.

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Regional Sectarian Conflict

The Iran deal sharpens the region's sectarian divide

By Fred Wehrey, April 17, 2015

This post was originally part of the “Iran and the Nuclear Deal” symposium.

How has the Iran nuclear framework deal affected Sunni-Shiite tensions in the Persian Gulf region?

In an ideal world, the framework should begin to lower the region's sectarian tensions, paving the way for a new era of interdependence. As Iran's moderates ascend and as its malign meddling in fractured Arab states declines – the theory goes – the jittery gulf monarchies will in turn feel more confident to dial down their sect-based bashing of the Islamic Republic. They will be less inclined to treat Iran as an existential menace and more as a friendly competitor – if not a full-fledged partner – in regional order. With their airwaves, clerical pulpits and Twitter feeds cleared of sectarian vitriol, the gulf monarchies' domestic spaces will enjoy new breathing room, perhaps even enabling a fresh push for measured political reforms.

This was certainly part of President Obama's long-term vision for the plan – to establish what he called an “equilibrium ... between the Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, gulf states and Iran.”

Unfortunately, this happy scenario is still a long way off: The Persian Gulf region is actually experiencing an alarming surge in sectarianism. Iran's militant adventurism embodied in its Quds Force has continued unabated – and might even increase after the injection of funds from the lifting of sanctions. Although the framework received a tepid official endorsement from Riyadh, Sunni commentators in the gulf media are universally suspicious, seeing in it continued U.S. weakness, if not duplicity and unchecked Iranian power. “A palace made of sand,” one Saudi columnist wrote of the agreement. More sectarian voices like Saad al-Burayk attacked the deal as an ongoing war on Sunnis that was meant to free up Iranian funds for Yemen's Houthis, while the Sahwa activist Mohsen

al-Awajy condemned it as a “Zionist-Safavid platform” and urged Saudi Arabia to acquire its own nuclear capability.

Perhaps more importantly, though, the run-up to the nuclear deal saw a spike in Saudi-driven Sunni triumphalism stemming from the Arab military intervention in Yemen. Whatever potential benefits to sectarian relations the Iran deal could have offered have been offset by the escalating violence in Yemen – strife that gulf commentators and clerics are framing in starkly sectarian terms.

The Saudi decision to launch “Operation Decisive Storm” was rooted in very real security concerns about the Houthi's military buildup on the border. It was also intended to force Washington's hand on confronting Iran's regional policies. Yet there was also an unstated domestic calculus behind the invasion that followed a longstanding practice of playing the sectarian card to bolster domestic support for ruling families. This is certainly not new, as I've argued in a recent book. Simplified, the strategy goes something like this: Keep your political opposition divided amongst Sunnis and Shiites, keep your publics fixated on an external threat, and portray your benevolent rule as the only buffer against the impending chaos – the glue that keeps an otherwise fractious polity together.

Aside from its deleterious humanitarian effects in Yemen, Decisive Storm has been an effective execution of this strategy from the Arab gulf rulers' point of view. The Saudi-led war with Yemen's Houthis came at a time when potentially troublesome and deeply sectarian Sunni constituents in gulf states, including clerics within the “official” establishment, were obliquely criticizing the Arab gulf regimes for their participation in the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State.

Now those same Sunni Islamists – and even the normally antagonistic Muslim Brotherhood – are rallying behind

al-Saud and other dynasties. For example, the enormously influential Sahwa cleric Salman al-Awda lauded the war as a new display of Sunni unity against “Persian authoritarianism.” Even in Kuwait, where sectarianism has been relatively muted, this dynamic is unfolding, albeit in a mirror image of the other gulf states, as Madeleine Wells has recently shown. Here, historically loyalist Shiite factions are seeking greater protection from the ruling al-Sabah family from resurgent sectarianism by Sunni tribal oppositionists.

Across the gulf region, the sectarian ripples of the Saudi-led military campaign have been toxic and violent. Most recently, it has launched an increasingly heated war of words between the United States’ two principal allies in the region, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. In remarks to reporters in Washington, Iraqi Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi slammed the Saudi-led campaign and asked rhetorically if the Saudis also had Iraq in their sights. Meanwhile, on the streets of Baghdad, thousands of Shiite protesters, including Shiite militias, have condemned the war and announced their willingness to aid the Houthis. Although such developments are unlikely to spark actual bilateral conflict – Abadi’s comments were directed at domestic audiences and Iran – they further complicate Washington’s efforts to construct a unified Arab front against the Islamic State.

But the war’s more insidious effects are being felt within the Arab gulf states, where the war is closing off political space and enabling a crackdown on dissent. Shiite citizens who do not join in the chorus of nationalist support for the war are being attacked once again for suspect loyalties. Activists that question the intervention on social media are arrested. In Bahrain, pro-regime Sunni parliamentarians are drawing up legislation that criminalizes any criticism of the operation by “Houthi supporters,” i.e. Shiite oppositionists from al-Wefaq. In the Shiite areas of Saudi Arabia’s eastern province, a policeman died and dozens of Shiite locals were wounded after security forces tried to preemptively disrupt protests in the restive town of Awamiya.

All of this serves to underscore Obama’s comments to the New York Times about the imperative of gulf domestic reform in the wake of the Iran deal. Much of the gulf’s insecurity and sectarian tensions stems from longstanding problems of governance and the uneven distribution of political and economic capital, rather than Iran’s power projection. These are vulnerabilities that no amount of U.S. security guarantees and arms transfers can protect. U.S. policymakers should therefore emphasize at the upcoming Camp David talks that while they will continue to assist in the gulf’s external defense they are also committed to moving the gulf forward on political reform – and they reserve the right to call out gulf deficiencies in public and also condition future aid on reform progress. They should also be leery of lending support to Arab interventions in fractured states that, while ostensibly undertaken for counter-terrorism aims or to check Iranian influence, often have more partisan agendas and end up exacerbating communal conflict.

Even if the nuclear deal paves the way for an eventual Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, we should not overestimate the ability of Tehran and Riyadh to control the region’s sectarian temperature like a thermostat. Non-state actors like the Islamic State, radical Salafis and Shiite militias are increasingly calling the shots, irrespective of the wishes of their regional patrons in the Arab gulf states and Iran. To be sure, a curtailing of outside funding from gulf or Iranian coffers would diminish their capacity to fan sectarian fires. But sectarianism is ultimately a by-product of institutional breakdown and state collapse in the Levant and Iraq – and that won’t be changing anytime soon.

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Why isn't there an anti-Iran alliance?

By F. Gregory Gause III, June 3, 2015

This post was originally part of the “International Relations and a new Middle East” symposium.

Saudi Arabia is fighting in Yemen and supporting rebels in Syria in part to push back against Iranian influence. Saudi's highly vocal efforts can distract from one of the most notable yet underappreciated elements of the current Middle East: the lack of a strong regional alliance against Iran. The absence of such a countervailing coalition is explained by what political scientist Randall Schweller termed “underbalancing,” the inability or unwillingness of states to form the kind of blocking alliances that balance of power theory would predict.

Iran is the undoubted geopolitical winner in the region's upheavals. It is the most influential player in Iraqi politics, nurturing close relations with the Abadi government, sponsoring if not controlling a number of Shiite militias and maintaining a cooperative relationship with the Kurdish Regional Government (exemplified by its supply of arms to the KRG during the Islamic State offensive last summer). Iranian support also has been essential to the preservation of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, and its client Hezbollah remains the dominant force in Lebanese politics. While Tehran's relationship with the Houthis is not as strong or as direct as that with Hezbollah or the Iraqi militias, the success of the Houthis in Yemen further contributes to the regional sense that Iran is on the march. Efforts by other regional powers to challenge Iranian gains have to date all failed, whether Turkish and Saudi support for the Syrian opposition, Saudi financing of the March 14 coalition in Lebanon and military aid to the Lebanese government, or the current Saudi air campaign against the Houthis.

According to balance-of-power logic and by its “balance of threat” alternative, the region should have witnessed a Turkish-Saudi-Israeli alignment aimed at Iran. Pooling resources makes sense since no single state can match

Iran's power. Israel and Saudi Arabia both seem to identify Iran as their major threat, and although Turkey may not be as focused on Iran, it still worries about Iran's growing regional reach. A Turkish-Saudi understanding makes perfect sense by the sectarian logic that many believe is driving regional politics, as both are Sunni states. But neither the trilateral nor the bilateral balancing alignment against Iran has emerged.

The biggest impediment to such a grand regional alliance is not the United States. Washington would like to see Iranian regional influence contained, even as it is negotiating with Tehran on the nuclear issue, and is hardly standing in the way of a regional alignment against Iran. Even if it were, there is little evidence that Turkey, Israel or Saudi Arabia are taking their cues from the Obama Administration these days.

Rather, the primary reason for underbalancing against Iran is found in the realm of ideas. Iran does not simply represent a power challenge to its Arab neighbors. It also challenges the legitimacy of their domestic political systems through its rejection of monarchy and its strong appeal to many fellow Shiites. It refuses to accept the American-led regional order that has prevailed since the end of the Cold War and thus directly challenges the foreign policy of many of its neighbors.

The potential members of an anti-Iranian coalition do not share common ideas about how politics in the region should be organized and are wary of cooperation with each other. Saudi Arabia and Turkey represent very different models of domestic political order. The Saudis support fellow monarchs and discourage democratic reform both at home and abroad. Turkey under AKP rule has supported a version of populist, Islamist democratic reform in the Arab world, particularly by backing Muslim Brotherhood movements. Meanwhile, the Israel of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is following a barely-veiled colonialist

project in the West Bank that makes it anathema to public opinion throughout the Muslim world.

The Middle East is not simply a multipolar region in terms of power. It is also multipolar ideologically. Political scientist Mark Haas provides a framework to understand why regions with multiple and competing political ideologies at play are more prone to underbalancing. Haas argues that in systems characterized by ideological bipolarity, like the Cold War, alliances will tend to follow ideological lines (NATO vs. the Warsaw Pact) and be very stable. However, when there are multiple ideological principles at work, state leaders will eschew alliances that seem logical from a power perspective because they dislike and fear the ideological stance of a potential ally. His paradigmatic example is 1930s Europe, where the Western democracies and the Soviet Union were unwilling to ally against the growing power of Nazi Germany.

Haas's model of ideological multipolarity fits the current Middle East like a glove. Not only do the Iranians, Saudis and Turks present mutually incompatible political models for their neighbors, but the Islamic State adds another model to the mix. It is propounding a transnational salafi jihadist model that shares elements of Saudi Arabia's conservative version of Islam, Iran's revolutionary rejection of the current regional system and AKP Turkey's Sunni Islamist populism -- yet is a direct threat to all three states. This ideological multipolarity puts serious obstacles in front of what pure power considerations would deem "logical" alliances.

The Saudis seem uncertain about who is their greater threat, Iran or the Islamic State. The seemingly natural Turkish-Saudi balancing alliance against Iran is impeded by Saudi fears that the Turkish model of populist, democratic Islamism will aid the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world. While the Saudis clearly want to roll back Iranian influence, they have also declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. Turkey partnered with Qatar, another regional player that had bet on the Muslim Brotherhood, to encourage Islamist opposition to the Assad regime. But it now seems to be torn between

the goal of Assad's removal and the fear that the Islamic State has become the more salient threat to Turkish security. Ankara, which historically has maintained decent relations with Israel, has now chosen to distance itself in a very public way from Jerusalem for ideological and domestic political reasons. The desires of some of Israel's friends in the United States to foster a Saudi-Israeli connection against both Iran and the Islamic State have not been realized. Riyadh cannot contemplate an open relationship with the Netanyahu government because of its fears of the domestic political consequences of such an alliance.

The perceptions of ideological threat that underpin the barriers to alliance formation in ideological multipolarity are not set in stone. It took a while, but eventually the Western democracies and the USSR did join forces against Nazi Germany. There are a few tentative indications that just such a perceptual change may be afoot in the Middle East. The new Saudi King Salman seems to be less focused on the political threat to the Saudi regime posed by the Muslim Brotherhood than was his predecessor. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan might be feeling his current regional isolation more than in the past. His February visit to Riyadh occasioned speculation from both sides that a rapprochement was in the works. The capture of Idlib by a coalition of Islamist elements of the Syrian opposition at the end of March might signal a new willingness for Saudi and Turkish clients in Syria to cooperate. The Yemeni Islah Party, which includes the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, recently announced its support for the Saudi bombing campaign against the Houthis.

These scattered events raise the possibility that the new Saudi king is reevaluating his predecessor's ranking of the threats faced by Riyadh, downplaying the Muslim Brotherhood threat to Saudi domestic regime security and opening up the possibility of a Turkish-Saudi alliance against Iran. A successful conclusion of the P5+1 talks with Iran could further increase regional balancing incentives against the Iranians. If the Saudis and the Turks both decide that Iran presents a bigger threat to them than

any other regional player, regardless of a successful P5+1 negotiation, then “underbalancing” against Tehran might end. However, a possible consequence of the formation of such an alliance might be more space for the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates to maneuver in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. More likely, the plethora of contesting ideological positions in the Middle East today will prevent decisive alliances from being formed against any regional

power – Iran or the Islamic State. “Underbalancing” is likely to characterize the region for some time.

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Overlapping contests and Middle East international relations: The return of the weak Arab state

By Bassel Salloukh, August 12, 2015

**This memo was originally prepared for the the “International Relations and a New Middle East” symposium*

One of the most enduring legacies of what Michael Hudson once labelled “the Montréal School” of Arab politics is its emphasis on the overlap between domestic, transnational and geopolitical factors in the making of Middle East international relations.¹ Long before the Islamic State exploded onto the regional scene in its quest for an imagined borderless caliphate, proponents of this school argued that International Relations (IR) theory could ill afford to ignore the overlap between these different levels of analysis. Through a sustained critique of realism’s obsession with external material threats and its underlying assumption of the state as a unitary rational actor, the Montréal School underscored the stubborn interplay between the domestic and regional levels in the making of Middle East international relations. This overlap, it argued, assumed a number of forms. Whether in the use of the region’s permeability to transnational ideological currents to advance the state’s geopolitical interests,

domestic actors aligning with regional powers to balance against their domestic opponents, the “omnibalancing” choices facing regime leaders, or the regime security and ideational threats driving foreign policy choices and regional alliances, the interplay between the domestic and regional levels served the local agendas of domestic actors *and* the geopolitical and state-building objectives of many states in the Arab world.² It also underscored the salience of immaterial, ideational threats in the making of Middle East international relations.³

Even the realist foreign policies that prevailed in the 1980s as states consolidated their infrastructural and coercive capabilities and started acting like seemingly rational actors did not end the aforementioned interplay between the domestic and regional levels. As Gregory Gause argued persuasively, Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait—like the 1980 invasion of Iran— was rooted in primarily regime security considerations.⁴ The 1990-91 invasion and subsequent liberation of Kuwait exposed but also unleashed a set of overlapping domestic and trans-regional challenges that collectively underscored the domestic challenges facing

authoritarian regimes, the changing permeability of the regional system, and the explosion of transnational non-state actors.⁵ In our 2004 co-edited volume, *Persistent Permeability? Regionalism, Localism, and Globalization in the Middle East*, Rex Brynen and I summarized these challenges to include “authoritarian states and inefficient economies confronted by the forces of globalization and by the exigencies of domestic reforms; foreign policies driven by both *realpolitik* and the complex dynamics of domestic politics; a consolidated state system set against a regional permeability now sustained by rapidly evolving information and communications technologies; American unipolarism set against its local (sometimes militant, and often Islamist) opponents, and, finally, a contemporary American neoconservative democratic discourse at odds with Washington’s political legacy in the region.”⁶ The 9/11 terrorist attacks and the explosion of al-Qaeda in the Arab world magnified the role of transnational actors in a new regional system in flux. Even its own proponents admitted that realism was ill equipped to accommodate these overlapping challenges.⁷

The 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq created a new regional landscape, unleashing dynamics that ultimately restored the primacy of the overlapping domestic and geopolitical battles of the 1950s and 1960s. Henceforth, the region became the theater for a grand Saudi-Iranian geopolitical confrontation fought not through classical realist state-to-state military battles, but rather through proxy domestic and transnational actors and the domestic politics of a number of weak Arab states, including the perennial candidate Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, postwar Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Yemen and Bahrain.⁸ As Gause has carefully noted, for both Riyadh and Tehran, the two main protagonists of this geopolitical contest, as well as for Qatar and Turkey, the objective “is not to defeat their regional rivals militarily on the battlefield. It is to promote the fortunes of their own clients in these weak state domestic struggles and thus build up regional influence.”⁹ Yet lest we deny them agency, domestic actors also possess their own calculations and interests. They invite and align with regional actors in a bid to balance the political influence

of their domestic opponents and advance their own local political interests. Lebanon’s sectarian elite mastered this game of aligning with external actors against domestic opponents in overlapping domestic and regional struggles. Consequently, Lebanon has served as a site for geopolitical contests since its creation. By 2006, state collapse and the pull of centrifugal forces in post-Saddam Iraq made the country look increasingly like Lebanon, however. Overlapping domestic and regional struggles also dominated the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The popular uprisings intensified and complicated the geopolitical contests that commenced after the U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, exacerbating them in some places, like in Lebanon, Yemen, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and allowing them to spread to new sites, namely Syria and Libya. As the contributions in this series by Gause, Curtis Ryan and Lawrence Rubin admirably demonstrate, the concomitant collapse of some regimes or states and ascendance of old and new political actors with transnational ideologies, the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic State respectively, restored to center stage the regional system’s ideational balancing dynamics.¹⁰

The Return of the Weak State

The swiftness with which the Syrian state collapsed as its own originally peaceful uprising developed into an overlapping domestic, regional and international “struggle for Syria”¹¹ captured the enduring interplay between domestic, regional and international factors in the making of Middle East international relations.¹² Yet unlike past contests over the Syrian state fought primarily through military coups, political clients and transnational ideological permeability, the present one underwent a complete militarization. Hafiz al-Assad’s once Hobbesian state, one that was capable of playing a substantial role in shaping Middle East international relations, is all but gone. To be sure, the regime’s survival hinges on a number of domestic factors, namely the military capabilities of its praetorian forces and its ability to retain narrow but viable political alliances with urban socioeconomic

elites and ethnic or religious minorities. Equally, and at times even more, important, however, is the support of international (i.e. Russia) and regional actors, namely Iran. Tehran's proxies, whether Hezbollah or a posse of Iraqi and Afghan Shiite militias, proved instrumental in propping up the regime at a moment of dire crisis when it was losing control of Syrian territory rapidly, and its end was predicted on a daily basis. The transformation of Syria from a Leviathan capable of waging sometimes domestically unpopular geopolitical battles to a weak state penetrated by regional actors and their proxies, as well as transnational and domestic Salafi-Jihadi actors, brought the regional system's interplay between the domestic and regional levels to new heights. The intrusive role played by the non-Arab regional states in the struggle for Syria transformed the region's overlapping domestic and geopolitical battles from what Malcom Kerr once labeled an "Arab Cold War" waged primarily through the fig leaf of Arab nationalism to what Gause more recently branded a "New Middle East Cold War" waged this time through the destructive force of sectarianism and Salafi-Jihadism.¹³

Yemen is another site where the militarization of the region's overlapping domestic and geopolitical battles assumed new and destructive levels. The institutional and coercive weakness of the Yemeni state and its grim economic conditions always invited external intervention in its domestic affairs.¹⁴ Yemen's inspiring popular uprising was hijacked when Riyadh intervened to ensure a transition away from Ali Abdullah Saleh to another authoritarian leader, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who proceeded to monopolize power and subsequently alienate the country's tribal groups. Capitalizing on the Houthis' "deep sense of victimization by the state,"¹⁵ Tehran's involvement in the Yemeni conflict is driven by its grand confrontation with Riyadh over geopolitical influence. After all, meddling in Saudi Arabia's security backyard is in keeping with the rules of geopolitical engagement described by Gause above. Riyadh's military response to the Houthi nimble takeover of large swathes of Yemen represented a break with Saudi Arabia's longstanding geopolitical tools, namely, proxy actors and financial largess. Riyadh's "Decisive Storm" campaign against

Yemen may be driven by both geopolitical and domestic calculations. It raised the geopolitical stakes between the two states, taking their confrontation beyond proxy wars, yet it has nevertheless avoided a direct military confrontation with Tehran.

Conclusion

The popular uprisings intensified the interplay between the domestic and regional levels in the making of Middle East international relations. Security and ideational threats are intertwined as regimes scramble to defend both their geopolitical interests and their domestic political order from a mix of domestic, regional and transregional actors and ideologies. Whether this long enduring interplay has found itself into IR theory is another matter, however. Indeed, a 2012 stocktaking of "Domestic Explanations of International Relations" included only one reference to a work pertaining to Middle East international relations!¹⁶ Despite this, it would be wrong to assume that Middle East international relations has had no impact whatsoever on mainstream realist theorizing. For example, the more nuanced and sophisticated realist approach of Stephen Walt's *Taming American Power* is one fine example of the impact of Middle East international relations on IR theorizing.¹⁷ The richer analysis undertaken in this book, expanding the arc of strategies available to threatened states to include balancing, balking, binding, blackmail and delegitimation, is informed substantially by the overlapping regional and domestic consequences of the 2003 US invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.

The 'new Middle East Cold War' is also a textbook case of the effects of overlapping domestic and geopolitical conflicts on the malleability and renegotiation of otherwise complex ethnic identities and, in turn, how these identities affect foreign policy and alliance choices. In Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya, overlapping conflicts incurred state collapse, which in turn led to a shift from national and more inclusive identities toward narrower sectarian, tribal or ethnic identities. Saudi Arabia's deployment of sectarianism to achieve what are otherwise geopolitical objectives, before as well as after the popular uprisings, and

Iran's use of sectarianism to mobilize its regional proxies in defense of its geopolitical allies, magnified the sectarian dimension of these conflicts in which other divisions have always been equally if not more important and class or regional divisions often overlapped with sectarian cleavages.¹⁸ Lebanon is the Arab world's enduring example of the institutionalization of historically constructed sectarian identities into a corporate consociational power-sharing agreement that, with time, looks immutable. Post-Saddam Iraq is duplicating Lebanon's pitfalls: sectarian and ethnic identities will soon assume a reified status with the country exposed to overlapping domestic and external contests. Yemen is also instructive here. Riyadh's use of sectarianism as an instrument of geopolitics and the Houthis' revengeful acts as they move south are shattering the country's once shared traditions. In a country where "sectarian differences meant almost nothing until recent years,"¹⁹ the overlapping domestic and geopolitical struggle over Yemen is cast increasingly in sectarian terms, at the expense of far more important tribal and regional markers of political identity. Similarly, the overlapping domestic and geopolitical contest in post-Qaddafi Libya has created new fault lines along hitherto dormant ethnic and religious identities. These include battles between "Libya's Islamists, the merchants of Misrata, the Arab Bedouin tribes concentrated in the Green Mountains of the east, the indigenous Imazighen (i.e., Berbers) in the west, and the two ethnic groups of Libya's slice of the Sahara—the Tuareg and Tubu." Contests over post-Qaddafi Libya increasingly look like "a battle between Bedouin Arab tribes and Libyans of other ethnic groups Arabized over centuries."²⁰ They are constructing new modes of political identity and mobilization, tearing Libya apart.

The return of the weak state to the Arab world and the renegotiation of new identities as a result of the interplay between domestic and geopolitical battles underscore the continued benefits of theoretical eclecticism in explaining Middle East international relations. Whether we are studying the foreign policy and alliance choices of regional actors, or the regional system's 'persistent permeability' and the use of transregional ideologies as a power resource, it is far more rewarding to travel between theoretical

paradigms than to engage in theoretical sectarianism. Scholars of Middle East international relations have long mastered this kind of theoretical eclecticism, deploying any mix of neo-realist, regime security, historical sociology and constructivist explanations in a happy theoretical marriage.²¹ It is high time IR theory does the same and, in the process, pays better attention to those more generalizable theoretical insights generated from the study of Middle East IR.

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¹ See Michael C. Hudson, "American Hegemony and the Changing Terrain of Middle East International Relations," in Bassel F. Salloukh and Rex Brynen, eds., *Persistent Permeability? Regionalism, Localism, and Globalization in the Middle East* (London: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), p. 163.

² See, for example, Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals, 1958-1970* third edition, (New York: Oxford UP, 1971); Cyrus Schayegh, "1958 Reconsidered: State Formation and the Cold War in the Early Postcolonial Arab Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, (2013), pp. 421-443; Rex Brynen, "Palestine and the Arab State System: Permeability, State Consolidation and the *Intifada*," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 24, 3, (September 1991), pp. 595-621; F. Gregory Gause, III, "Sovereignty, Statecraft and Stability in the Middle East," *Journal of International Affairs* 45, 2, (Winter 1992), pp. 441-469; Steven R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics* 43, 2 (January 1991), pp. 233-256; Bahgat Korany, Paul Noble, and Rex Brynen, eds., *The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993); Curtis R. Ryan, *Inter-Arab Alliances: Regime Security and Jordanian Foreign Policy* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2009); Lauri A. Brand, "Economics and Shifting Alliances: Jordan's Relations with Syria and Iraq, 1975-81," *International Journal of*

Middle East Studies 26, 3, (August 1994), pp. 393-413; Ibrahim A. Karawan, "Sadat and the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Revisited," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, 2, (May 1994), pp. 249-266; and Bassel F. Salloukh, "State Strength, Permeability, and Foreign Policy Behavior: Jordan in Theoretical Perspective," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 18, 2, (Spring 1996), pp. 39-65. For a dynamic historical sociological study of how the local (whether class, ideology, gender, ethnicity, the state, or religion), regional, and international levels interact in the making of Middle East international relations see Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³ See F. Gregory Gause, III, "Balancing What? Threat Perception and Alliance Choice in the Gulf," *Security Studies* 13, 2, (2003/4), pp. 273-305; and Michael C. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁴ See F. Gregory Gause, III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009).

⁵ See Bassel F. Salloukh and Rex Brynen, "Pondering Permeability: Some Introductory Explorations," in Salloukh and Brynen, eds., *Persistent Permeability?* pp. 1-14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

⁷ See Theory Talks, "Stephen Walt on the Israel Lobby, the 'Security' in Security Studies, and the Structural Nature of Interstate Competition," 25 August 2009, at: <http://www.theory-talks.org/2009/08/theory-talk-33.html>.

⁸ See Bassel F. Salloukh, "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East," *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* 48, 2 (June 2013), pp. 32-46.

⁹ F. Gregory Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism: New Middle East Cold War* Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, 11 July 2014, p. 8 at <http://www.brookings.edu/~/>

[media/research/files/papers/2014/07/22%20beyond%20sectarianism%20cold%20war%20gause/english%20pdf.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~fregory/files/papers/2014/07/22%20beyond%20sectarianism%20cold%20war%20gause/english%20pdf.pdf).

¹⁰ See Morten Valbjørn and André Bank, "Signs of a New Arab Cold War: The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide," *Middle East Report* 242, (Spring 2007), pp. 6-11; Lawrence Rubin, *Islam in the Balance: Ideational Threats in Arab Politics* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2014); F. Gregory Gause III, "Why isn't there an Anti-Iran Alliance?" *Monkey Cage*, 3 June 2015, at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/06/03/why-isnt-there-an-anti-iran-alliance/?postshare=2741433403901336>; and Gause, Ryan, and Rubin's contributions in this series.

¹¹ See Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

¹² See Bassel F. Salloukh, "The Geopolitics of the Struggle for Syria," *e-International Relations*, 23 September 2013, at: <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/09/23/the-geopolitics-of-the-struggle-for-syria/>; and Curtis Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria," *Middle East Report* 262, (Spring 2012), at: <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer262/new-arab-cold-war-strugglesyria>.

¹³ See Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*; and Gause, *Beyond Sectarianism*.

¹⁴ See F. Gregory Gause, III, *Saudi-Yemeni Relations: Domestic Structures and Foreign Influence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

¹⁵ Robert F. Worth, "Yemen: The Houthi Enigma," *NYR Blog*, 30 March 2015, at: <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2015/mar/30/yemen-houthi-enigma/>.

¹⁶ See Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, "Domestic Explanations of International Relations," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 15, (2012), pp. 161-181. The reference is to Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ:

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¹⁷ See Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).

¹⁸ See Bassel F. Salloukh, “The Arab World after the Popular Uprisings: A Spirit Restored?” in Kirsten Fisher and Robert Stewart, eds., *Transitional Justice and the Arab Spring* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 17-35.

¹⁹ See Worth, “Yemen.”

²⁰ See Nicolas Pelham, “Libya against Itself,” *New York Review of Books*, 19 February 2015, at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/feb/19/libya-against-itself/>.

²¹ In addition to the ME IR literature cited above, see also Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East*, 2nd Edition, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).



Beyond ‘geosectarianism’: political systems and international relations in the Middle East

By Ewan Stein, August 13, 2013

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All of the Middle East’s most powerful states now face acute crises over the legitimacy of their political systems. Two years into the ‘Arab Spring’ it seemed that some kind of populist, majoritarian Islamic republicanism would sweep away secular dictatorships and monarchies alike. Today, however, the prospects for this brand of political legitimacy appear dim. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) has lost its parliamentary majority, halting what many saw as Turkey’s drift toward Iranian-style religious authoritarianism. Egypt’s first freely elected president Mohamed Morsi faces a death sentence two years after his ouster, with many blaming the Muslim Brotherhood’s fall on its desire to create a single-party Islamic state. Iran’s reform-oriented president endures ongoing tussles with conservative forces over the extent to which the state should intervene in religious, cultural and intellectual life and has been

accused of helping to legitimize an authoritarian system. And in Saudi Arabia, the international spotlight shines on a regime that deems 1000 lashes a proportionate response to political dissidence.

These struggles over domestic political legitimacy are the bread and butter of Comparative Politics but rarely of International Relations. Conventional accounts of Middle East international relations tend to prioritize geopolitical drivers, often incorporating sectarian or other identities as intervening variables: Turkey aims to boost its influence in the region through cultivating fraternal links with Sunni Islamist parties; Iran attempts the same but is stymied by the Sunni-Shiite divide and so must fall back on Shiite allies and proxies; Saudi Arabia fights a rear-guard battle to contain Iranian influence by bankrolling “moderate” Sunni dictatorships and jihadist groups.

This geosectarian approach paints, at best, an incomplete picture. A look at the reactions of Turkey, Saudi Arabia

and Iran to the Arab, particularly Egyptian, uprisings between 2011 and 2013 supports the following, fairly intuitive, hypothesis: foreign policy actors support abroad the same kinds of political structures they enjoy, or would like to enjoy, at home. This occurs primarily for reasons of internal and external legitimation: i.e. “my system looks better if others are also using it.” The tendency toward homogeneity in “the ordering of domestic affairs,” as Fred Halliday noted in his book, *Revolution and World Politics: the Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power*, represents a central dynamic in the structure of international relations.

Turkey

The AKP’s pro-Islamist—essentially populist—foreign policy alienated large parts of Turkish political and civil society, and may have contributed to the party’s poor parliamentary election showing in June 2015. Turkey was not pushed into pursuing this foreign policy by any powerful external actors and had been achieving steady success with its “zero problems with neighbors” approach prior to 2011. There is no compelling geostrategic explanation for what turned out to be a reckless gamble on the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and a comparable outcome in Syria.

Turkey’s response to the Arab uprisings reflected, rather, the domestic fears and aspirations of the AKP as a party of government. Internally and externally (particularly in the eyes of Washington), Turkey’s prestige could only increase as its model of a majoritarian democracy with an interventionist Islamic cultural agenda spread across the region. With the overthrow of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, Erdogan saw an opportunity to export the AKP model to the Arab world’s most populous and influential state. Turkey’s commitment to the Muslim Brotherhood amounted to more than words: it invested some \$2 billion in the country during Morsi’s tenure.

Turkish support for Morsi as Egypt’s legitimate elected president was no altruistic strategy to democratise the Arab world. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, as Erdogan knew well from its actions while in power, was

ambivalent about liberal democracy. The Brotherhood could be expected to behave in the same majoritarian manner that alienated substantial sections of Turkish society from the AKP. The collapse of this model in Egypt would have serious implications for the legitimacy of the socially interventionist and populist system the AKP hoped to perpetuate.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi reactions to the Arab uprisings and their aftermath cannot be fully explained by geosectarian concerns either. Saudi Arabia’s hostility toward the Muslim Brotherhood was evidently not related to any actual Egyptian foreign policy realignment: Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement was lukewarm at best and policy toward Israel remained business as usual. Even the United States praised Morsi’s statesmanship in brokering a deal in Palestine.

For a more complete explanation, we must turn once again to the question of the kinds of domestic political systems the Saudis feel most comfortable living among. It is no revelation that Saudi Arabia has an interest in seeing that none of the existing Arab monarchies, particularly those of the GCC, fall. Saudi Arabia is almost always considered a conservative, as opposed to a revisionist, power in that it seeks to preserve monarchies against the onslaught of popular sovereignty. However, this classification misses the arguably more significant transformatory influence Saudi Arabia has had on domestic politics beyond the Gulf, particularly since the 1970s.

Just because Saudi Arabia has not used its economic might to bring back monarchies in Egypt and elsewhere does not mean that it has not exported key elements of its political model. The most salient of which is the functional separation between holders of political power, on the one hand, and holders of cultural (mainly religious) power, on the other. This division of labor has been a defining feature of post-populist republics in the Arab world, at least partially due to Saudi influence. The laboratory, and most important poster child, for Saudi political engineering was Egypt.

Hosni Mubarak has been credited with returning Egypt to the “Arab fold” following its expulsion from the Arab League in the wake of the Camp David Accords. This reintegration involved the progressive strengthening of Egyptian-Saudi military, economic and cultural integration. Mubarak’s brand of sovereignty was coercive and dictatorial, but not—to use Robert Jackson’s term—“totalitarian” in the sense of aspiring to an organic ideological unity between state and society. This was the hallmark of the Nasserist system that also survived under Baath party rule in Iraq and Syria as well as, in an idiosyncratic form, in Ghaddafi’s Libya. Under Mubarak, state-level politics became increasingly managerial, while the ideological and cultural initiative was ceded to a range of (mainly Islamist) actors in society.

The external legitimation function, for Saudi Arabia, of post-populist systems such as Mubarak’s Egypt is captured in the notion of the “moderate state.” Within this rubric, the international community (again, primarily Washington) overlooks domestic coercion and illiberalism when the state’s foreign policy practice is aligned with U.S. interests. Such alignment is harder to guarantee under populist republics. The post-populist system in Egypt survived until the triumph of Mohamed Morsi in the 2012 elections, which placed the Muslim Brotherhood in a position of both political and ideological leadership. Egypt’s drift, at least potentially, toward some kind of majoritarian Islamist democracy, was a change the Saudi regime could not allow.

It is significant to note, however, that President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi has not returned Egypt to the status quo ante. In dispensing with the Muslim Brotherhood, and indeed any partners in society, Sissi appears bent on establishing a totalitarian (actually quasi-fascist) state based on the cult of his personality. Although Saudi Arabia whole-heartedly approved of the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood—declaring it a terrorist organization and criminalizing any expression of sympathy for it—there are some indications that the new administration under King Salman may be ready to ease up on punishing the Brothers. Although generally explained in terms of a Saudi

desire to strengthen the Sunni front against Iran, this shift more strongly supports the argument that Saudi Arabia prefers a return to post-populism in Egypt.

Iran

While Iran’s eagerness to build bridges with post-Mubarak Egypt makes good geopolitical as well as economic sense, its confused reaction to Morsi’s performance and ouster does not. Iran’s position has been ambiguous, partially due to the fragmented, factionalized nature of its political system. The Arab uprisings offered an opportunity for the Iranian regime to gain external legitimation for its Islamic republican political model. As with Saudi Arabia, the fact that Iran is not exporting its version of a state governed by a religious leader (*wilayat e-faqih*) to the Arab world does not mean its model is not replicable. It embodies the same populist, culturally interventionist model toward which the AKP has been moving. Although this may be a well-worn polemical charge, it contains more than a grain of truth. Significantly, Iran-Turkey relations are currently more functional than either Iran-Egypt or Turkey-Egypt relations, despite the two states being essentially at war in Syria.

When the Islamist political breakthrough of 2012 failed to yield a substantive foreign policy shift in Egypt, internal Iranian discourse became more critical of the Muslim Brotherhood; however, in general, the Islamic Republic adopted an uncharacteristically indulgent attitude toward the reticence of Egypt’s Islamist leaders. It largely refrained from launching the kinds of fiery attacks it employed against Saudi Arabia, for example. Instead, Iran adopted a wait-and-see approach. Unlike Turkey, which invested substantial economic and political capital in backing Morsi’s regime, Iran lacked both the means and, more significantly, the domestic political consensus to follow suit. The AKP considered the spread of the Turkish model vital for its internal and external legitimation and had the executive power to follow through with this policy. Iran, on the other hand, was divided: the totalitarian elements of the political system, led by Khamenei, had no interest in spreading ‘democracy’, whereas the reformist

current, represented by Rouhani, balked at legitimizing a majoritarian Brotherhood regime.

Iran ultimately joined Turkey in condemning the coup but in far less vociferous terms. Whereas Erdogan focused his ire on the military, for obvious domestic reasons, Rouhani and Khamenei also blamed the Muslim Brotherhood. Morsi's ouster triggered a flurry of intellectual analysis in the Iranian (state controlled) media. For conservatives, the Brotherhood failed because it did not follow the Iranian example and purge the political system of counterrevolutionary elements, and because it remained subservient to U.S. and Israeli diktats. Reformists blamed Morsi's undemocratic practices and the Muslim Brotherhood's incompetence. The fact that Khamenei himself repeated the democratic legitimacy line, despite his totalitarianism, arguably reflects the Supreme Leader's acknowledgement of Rouhani's mandate and Khamenei's reluctance to provoke domestic protest at a time of regional turmoil. This hypocrisy will have been lost on few Iranians.

Conclusion

Geopolitics and identity remain highly relevant to international affairs, but they do not present the complete picture. In the post-Cold War world, where the battle over economic systems has been largely won, the most salient divisions in the world relate to political systems. The Middle East, as has so often been the case, is a pivotal front in this battle, which rages between regimes and oppositions, as well as between state and non-state actors. At stake is whether totalizing majoritarian Islamic democracy can assert itself as a serious challenge to Wahhabi-style monarchy and its progeny, post-populist dictatorship. Given the setbacks Islamic democracy has suffered in Egypt, and now Turkey, the prospects for monarchy and dictatorship appear rosier. A third alternative, that of a more liberal democracy, may remain elusive in the region for quite some time as it continues to lack any powerful state sponsor.

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Saudi-Iranian rapprochement? The incentives and the obstacles

By F. Gregory Gause, March 17, 2014

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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.¹ 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.²

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.³ 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.⁴ Iraq's invasion of Kuwait soured the Saudis on their alliance with Iraqi President 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

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 v. 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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¹ “Islam proclaims monarchy and hereditary succession wrong and invalid” (Ruhollah Khomeini, “Islamic Government,” in Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations*, trans. and ann. by Hamid Algar (London: KPI, 1985), p. 31.

² On relations in the 1980s, see Henner Furtig, *Iran’s Rivalry with Saudi Arabia Between the Gulf Wars*, (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2002); Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Chapters 1, 4; F. Gregory Gause, III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Chapter 3.

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.

⁵ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, Chapter 4.

⁶ Michael Slackman, “U.S. Ally and Foe are Trying to Avert War in Lebanon,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2007.

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