



Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East

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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>.

Introduction: Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East

Marc Lynch and Amaney Jamal

What is the current structure of international relations, and how does this shape the politics of the Middle East? For decades, the answer was clear: international structure was unipolar, and American predominance shaped the alliance choices of both its allies and its adversaries. In recent years, this clarity has been overtaken by confusion. American primacy has perhaps declined, or at least shifted in its application, but no rival power has yet risen to take its place. How has this perceived change in global structure affected regional politics in the Middle East?

In September 2018, POMEPS, Princeton University's Bobst Center, and the American University of Beirut brought together nearly two dozen scholars from the United States, Europe and the Middle East at AUB to discuss the impact of shifting global structure on regional dynamics. This collection features sixteen essays ranging across diverse perspectives on the evolving relationship between the global and the regional. Taken together, they offer a fascinating window into the relationship between [the global and the regional](#), and the implications for contemporary regional politics.

Pervasive Uncertainty and International Structure

Discussion of American retrenchment from the Middle East has become a persistent theme in debates in both Washington and the region. While some date American decline to its overstretch in Iraq and others to its failure to intervene more forcefully in Syria, the conventional wisdom takes the retreat of U.S. power as a given.

This is in some ways odd. The perceived decline of American primacy is not easily observed in terms of material power. The United States continues to far outpace all potential rivals in military spending, and maintains an extensive array of military bases and alliances across the Middle East. Its perceived retreat is primarily from arenas where it overextended itself in preceding decades,

such as Iraq, or areas which it has declined intervention to overturn the status quo, such as Syria. The Trump administration's reported decision to withdraw most troops from Syria came after accomplishing the declared mission of the territorial defeat of the Islamic State. The U.S. is expanding bases such as the Al-Udeid base in Qatar. Despite Russia's opportunistic interventions and China's economic diplomacy, to this point the U.S. still faces no serious peer competitor.

The perception of U.S. decline is less about its capabilities than about its policy choices and its inability to translate capabilities into outcomes. Hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops were unable to create a durable, legitimate, pro-American state in Iraq; toppling Qaddafi did not lead to a democratic Libya; support to the Saudi-UAE war in Yemen did not produce victory. Close allies have repeatedly opposed and undermined top American foreign policy objectives, such as the nuclear agreement with Iran. Overall, an increasingly turbulent region consumed by domestic challenges and intra-regional rivalries is simply less amenable to external control. As Hazbun [puts it in this collection](#), "Middle East geopolitics has transformed from a system organized around and against a US-managed security architecture into a multipolar system lacking norms, institutions, or balancing mechanisms to constrain conflict and the use of force."

The reality of continued U.S. military presence and dominance has been largely obscured by perception. That does not make it less real: as constructivists remind us, perception and belief often are more important than base reality in the daily course of international affairs. The perception of American decline is less about its capabilities than it is about the perceived inability to secure presumably desired outcomes and the seemingly successful moves of its rivals. Obama's decision not to bomb the Asad regime in September 2013 may have had little real impact on the course of that war, as [Christopher Phillips](#) reminds

us, but it fueled a perception of U.S. weakness, which led a wide range of other actors to take highly significant actions in response. In the opposite direction, Russia's successful intervention to save the Asad regime in 2015 created a perception of power, which had little basis in the actual balance of power.

This is an important corrective to any concept of an easily observed "real" balance of power. Instead, perceptions with little objective foundation repeatedly became a self-fulfilling prophecy through an agitated process of public social construction. The more that regional powers doubted American capabilities or intentions, the more independently they acted based on that perception. As Darwich put it, "the perceived change in external actors' roles by regional powers in the Middle East has led to major uncertainties and changes in their behaviour... The change in the US role has led to a perceived vacuum in the region, and thereby, changed its social structure, which influenced regional actors' role conceptions and behaviour."

The shifting perception has also been fueled by the uniquely profound uncertainty about the actual policies of the Trump administration. Most leaders in the Middle East disliked the policies of the Obama administration, passively or actively opposing such initiatives as the nuclear agreement with Iran or support for democratic transitions. But they understood them. Trump's policies have been wildly inconsistent, with internal disagreements routinely surfacing in sudden policy changes. Above all, his withdrawal from the JCPOA despite IAEA certification of Iran's compliance with its terms upended years of multilateral diplomacy and cast profound doubt on the reliability of any American commitments.

Syria is the most palpable area of such policy confusion. Early in his term, Trump carried out a symbolic military strike against a Syrian airfield that seemed to herald a shift towards muscular confrontation with Damascus. But then there was no follow through and nothing changed. In fall 2018, senior administration officials began publicly articulating a new strategy, which would maintain a significant U.S. troop presence in Syria following the defeat

of the Islamic State in the name of combating Iranian influence. Just as the region began to internalize this new policy direction, Trump suddenly announced the full and rapid withdrawal of U.S. troops. Either policy might be defensible, but the rapid moves between them left regional actors unable to formulate coherent policies in response.

Similar policy confusion and weakness were revealed in the American response to the blockade of Qatar. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain announced this boycott suddenly following Trump's ostentatious visit to Riyadh. Numerous U.S. officials pushed back against it, based on the U.S. strategic interest in sustaining GCC unity against Iran. Trump then undermined their efforts by tweeting support for the blockade. As the blockade settled in to become a new reality, a succession of U.S. officials and envoys tried to negotiate its end while sustaining strong working relationships with both sides. The U.S. military and diplomatic corps viewed the blockade as clearly detrimental to vital national interests, but were unable to compel their allies to end it. This stalemate both increased uncertainty about real U.S. intentions and exacerbated perceptions of U.S. weakness.

Russia's inroads into the region reflect a similar perception-based dynamic. This perception led many regional leaders to entertain offers of arms sales or military support from Russia. Even highly dependent U.S. allies such as Jordan ostentatiously met with Russian officials. Russia, as described in detail in a parallel report co-sponsored with the Elliott School's Central Asia Program, opportunistically played a weak hand to undermine American alliances and project influence without significant material commitments outside of Syria. It has been very successful at crafting this image on the cheap: for instance, breathless media coverage of its limited support to Libyan Field Marshal Khalifa al-Haftar has allowed him to be cast as a Russian client even as the overwhelming majority of his military support comes from American allies UAE and Egypt.

China has welcomed moves by Gulf leaders to pivot towards Asia as a way of securing its economic interests,

but with little significant material military presence. Its very real and increasing political and economic weight is often overlooked because it does not engage in military interventions or take an overt political role. Growing ties between Arab regimes and China generated significantly less consternation among American grand strategists than do such contacts with Russia, despite their likely greater longer-term significance. Overall, then, the flirtations of American allies has created a perception of multipolarity which has little basis in material reality. Hedging is not the same as shifting alliances, though the two have easily been confused.

Regional Responses

The Middle East has responded in a variety of ways to this perceived decline of American primacy. That shifting international structure is, of course, only one element of the broader international and regional landscape they face. The Arab uprisings of 2011 posed an existential threat to the survival of regimes, which colored every aspect of their domestic and foreign policies. The uprisings unfolded across the whole region, drawing power from their synchronization across borders. This meant that frightened Arab leaders had to view protests anywhere, not only at home, as potential threats to be met. In response, Arab regimes increased their cooperation in defense of regime survival. Wealthy Gulf states sent many billions of dollars to support fragile but friendly regimes such as those in Jordan and Morocco. They supported the overthrow of the elected Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt and financed the reconstitution of Sisi's military regime. They also intervened in civil wars such as Libya, Syria and Yemen in hopes of placing their proxies in power and denying such a win to their rivals.

As several of the contributions to this collection note, the more that the U.S. offloaded policy to local allies and the less resources it was willing to commit to achieving policy goals, the more those allies pursue their own interests. Soubrier describes this as a shift from a restrained, status-quo oriented policy set to "assertive and competing power plays which are in turn deeply reshaping the conduct

of international relations within the Gulf region, in the broader MENA region, and beyond." Allied complaints of a lack of U.S. leadership often in practice meant that the U.S. chose to not follow their lead – a reverse chain-gang logic. Had the United States retained its position of primacy, it might perhaps have been able to restrain its regional allies from some of their more destabilizing actions. Several essays in the collection suggest that U.S. decline both enabled and fueled the erratic foreign policy choices of Gulf states and other regional actors. It is possible that the causal arrows run in the other direction, of course. The intensity of the perceived regional challenges and the mixed preferences of Washington on key issues (such as democratization in Egypt or intervention in Syria) may have tipped the balance of alliance politics towards the local powers.

Domestic Stability and Regional Order

It is no accident that regional disorder has accompanied profound domestic challenges in key states. For many leaders, foreign policy adventures are a way to secure domestic popularity, to distract from internal problems, or to protect against perceived threats emanating from abroad. The declining domestic stability and legitimacy of U.S. allies is an underappreciated dimension of its declining primacy. Key allies which once carried a large share of the security burden, such as Egypt and Turkey, are consumed by domestic instability. Others, such as Saudi Arabia, have become ever more erratic and confrontational. Public hostility to the United States, cultivated by those regimes in ever more aggressive ways, undermines the soft power foundations of American primacy.

More broadly, weak states invite myriad security problems. The turbulence identified by Hazbun constantly threatens to overwhelm stability. The challenges to these states are staggering. As Khouri observes, the focus by external powers on matters of high politics blind them to "new and deep structural threats that have converged in a cycle of poverty, inequality and vulnerability that seems likely to keep the region mired in stress conflict for decades to

come.” Refugee flows increase demands on services and resources. Non-state actors take advantage of pockets of state failure. And perceived insecurity galvanizes exclusionary forms of identity politics which can undermine national cohesion and encourage dangerous strands of sectarianism and prejudice. Neither the U.S. nor Europe have prioritized the types of democratic reforms which might enhance the resilience of these states. The relentless prioritization of regime security, supported by external actors worried primarily about stability, ironically leaves these states more vulnerable to serious disruption.

The essays in this collection do not offer a single conclusion as to either the reality or the implications of

declining U.S. primacy. By approaching the question of structural change from multiple diverse perspectives, they point the way towards better understanding its complexity and ambiguity. This analytical diversity parallels the divergent perceptions of structure, opportunity and threat by individual leaders across the region.

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Shifting Alliances and Shifting Theories in the Middle East

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International relations theory has traditionally placed alliance politics at the very center of many analyses of international or regional politics. But international relations theory has also been characterized by struggles between competing paradigms and schools of thought, or what is sometimes referred to as “theoretical sectarianism” (Salloukh 2015: 50). Scholars of Middle East regional politics, in contrast, have rarely associated with a single school or perspective, and have been more likely to employ a kind of theoretical pluralism to understand the details and nuances of regional political life, including alliances.

This kind of scholarly eclecticism is even more important today, in the post-Arab Spring era, as the region has been characterized by rising regional instability even as a traditional hegemonic power – the United States – has declined in relative power and influence over regional affairs. The many regional and global changes, in short, have not led to the apparent triumph of any particular theoretical approach, but rather have underscored the salience of multiple I.R. theory perspectives in understanding the politics of shifting regional alliances. Key concepts regarding alliances – drawn from multiple perspectives – remain important for understanding Middle East alliance politics, but there are also some notable changes in regional international relations in the post-Arab Spring era. This essay examines key findings in the alliance theory literature, with some reflections on what this means for shifting theories, shifting alliances, and regional politics today. I will turn first to the literature on alliances, then to shifts in regional alliance politics, especially since 2011.

Shifting Alliances, Shifting Theories

Variations in Realism

Realist scholars have often focused on alliances and the balance of power as key features of international relations. But in his book *The Origins of Alliances*, Stephen Walt

argued that the balance of power and polarity were not enough to explain the shifting alliance dynamics associated with Middle East regional politics. States were not just responding to power shifts, but also to perceived intentions, and therefore to a balance of threats (Walt 1985, 1987, 1988). States, he argued, then need to choose between *bandwagoning* with a rising power or *balancing* against it.

Other scholars similarly made adjustments to the alliance and balance of power theories, extending the range of policy options beyond balancing and bandwagoning to include *omni-balancing*, *buck-passing*, and *chain-ganging*. Steven David examined relations between regional states and global powers. Developing countries, including states in the Middle East, were likely to be as concerned with internal threats to their own ruling regimes as they were with external balances of power or threats. Weaker states in particular were therefore likely to engage in *omni-balancing* – allying with a global power that would help a local regime counter its own home-grown or internal threats (David 1991a, 1991b). Similarly, Harknett and Vandenberg, noting the importance of internal as well as external security concerns, argued that Middle East alliances were responses not only to exogenous concerns but also to inter-related domestic and international threats (Harknett and Vandenberg 1997).

Weaker states in regional systems might try to avoid all of the above behaviors, however, hoping that more powerful states would counter a rising hegemonic or otherwise threatening power. This *buck-passing* behavior is a gamble usually made by states desperate to avoid wars they are likely to lose. But if states are convinced that alliances are essential to ensure their own security, then they may pursue the opposite strategy, not only committing to an alliance but potentially even over-committing. When states effectively *chain-gang* like this, creating firm alliances in the face of threats, they engage in a gamble of a different

kind, in which allies may drag a state into a war it would otherwise prefer to avoid (Christensen and Snyder 1990).

Glenn Snyder, one of the most prolific scholars of alliances (Snyder 1984, 1990, 1991, 1997), suggested that *security dilemmas* – a key concern in realist analyses -- exist not only between potential adversaries, but also between allies. The alliance security dilemma occurs because states have imperfect information, rely on their own threat perceptions, and can never be completely certain of their own allies' behavior. States are then torn between two opposite potential outcomes from the 'alliance security dilemma' – *abandonment* or *entrapment* -- in which one's own allies either abandon a state at its moment of greatest insecurity or entrap it by drawing it into an unwanted conflict (Snyder 1984, 1997).

Schweller (2004) introduced the concept of *underbalancing* in which states fail to respond to a rising regional threat; that is, they do not create a countervailing alliance. Haas later expanded on this notion, showing that states may "underbalance" despite the power politics dimensions, when they object to the ideology or regime type of potential allies (Haas 2014). Gregory Gause applies a combination of these perspectives to explain a key dilemma in Middle East regional politics – the lack of a countervailing coalition against rising Iranian power since the early 2000's. From a purely realist perspective, one might have expected regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel to band together to counter Iran, quite some time ago (Gause 2015).

Challenging Realism

Challenging Realist expectations, scholars have pointed to domestic politics and political economy as key variables determining foreign policy and alliance shifts by Middle East states. Domestic political concerns (Barnett and Levy 1991) or the "low politics" of economic well-being (Barnett 1990) can at times provide stronger explanations for foreign policy and alliance politics, than the traditional "high politics" of military capabilities and the balance of power. Laurie Brand (1994a, 1994b), in an explicitly

economic approach to regional alliances, found that Middle East alliances can be rooted in *budget security*, that is, shoring up an economically dependent state's economic needs. Jamie Allinson (2016) applies political economy in a historical sociology perspective to examine Jordanian alliance policies during the Arab cold war period in the 1950's.

Constructivist scholars challenged realism from a decidedly non-material approach, examining the roles of ideas, identities, and socially-constructed norms to understand alliances in the Middle East. Michael Barnett, in his book *Dialogues in Arab Politics* (1998) took a macro-level approach, examining the entire Arab regional system, but with emphasis on changing norms and ideas in Arab politics, rather than material concerns with either high or low politics. Barnett argued that decades of regional Arab politics turned not on a military balance of power, but rather on conflicts over the meaning of Arabism itself, and hence of state and regional identities. Similarly, Marc Lynch examined domestic politics and debates within the public sphere in Jordan, over identities in particular, and showing how these internal and ideational dynamics caused shifts in Jordan's national identity and in the kingdom's perception of its own interests. Lynch's work showed that although interests drive policy, including alliance choices, they nonetheless cannot be assumed a priori. They are not, in short, externally-generated, objective, and fixed – as Neorealism would suggest – but internally-generated, subjective, and variable (Lynch 1999). It is important to note the differences here too, however, even between Constructivist approaches. While Barnett focused on ideologies, Lynch examined identities. Both are important to understanding regional politics in the Middle East.

In my own work, I have argued that the key interest for any ruling regime nonetheless remains its own survival in the face of multiple potential threats or challenges. Even concepts as basic as 'states' and 'security' therefore each need to be seen as contested domestically and internationally. Regimes often conflate their own survival with national security; that is, they conflate the regime

with the state as a whole. Focusing on *regime security* allows us to draw insights from multiple perspectives, even providing a bridge of sorts between realist, political economy, and constructivist approaches. Regimes in the Middle East in particular use alliances not just in the traditional sense, as external defense pacts, but also and perhaps even more often for domestic regime security. Alliances are in this respect transnational coalitions of ruling elites, propping each other up not only against traditional threats, but also against threats from within their own societies. This emphasis on regime survival therefore also underscores the economic underpinnings of alliances, especially for weaker powers in a regional system. Alliances provide political, diplomatic, and military support, as one would expect, but they also provide the economic largesse to pay off ruling coalitions of political elites, shoring up the domestic security of a regime and providing a key part of the economic basis for the regime's continued rule (Ryan 2002, 2009, 2015a, 2016).

Gregory Gause has also examined regional politics and alliances from a regime security perspective, but has more thoroughly explored the specific issue of threat perception. "Middle East leaders," he writes, "view external challenges to their domestic legitimacy and security, based on transnational ideological platforms of Islam and pan-Arabism, as being more serious than threats based simply upon a preponderance of military capabilities" (Gause 2003/4: 303). In a later comprehensive study of the international politics of the Persian Gulf, Gause noted that "recognition of the importance of ideas does not negate Realist insights about anarchy, power and conflict in the Persian Gulf; it contextualizes those Realist insights by giving us a fuller understanding of how state leaders define their interests and understand the power resources at their disposal" (Gause 2010: 243). Lawrence Rubin (2014) picked up on the theme of ideological and ideational threats and extended it to regime survival strategies including, but not limited to, alliance politics – specifically through an *ideational security dilemma*. States engage in 'ideational balancing' when a regime "aims to mitigate the domestic political threat from a projected transnational ideology" (Rubin 2014: 37). States are likely to see these ideational

challenges as threats not just internationally but also domestically.

Taking into consideration the many motivations noted above, alliance politics often turn into a complicated juggling act for precarious regimes, underscoring the need to understand Middle East regional politics, including alliances, from multiple interacting levels of analysis. A growing number of scholars have argued that students of international relations and Middle East politics do not necessarily need to choose one particular path, school, or paradigm. The most influential texts on the international relations of the Middle East, for example, draw on multiple perspectives, theories, and levels of analysis in explaining regional political dynamics (Hinnebusch 2003, Halliday 2005). Our emphasis should therefore be on utilizing key concepts introduced from varying perspectives, rather than on competing theories or paradigms.

Bassel Salloukh, for example, has argued that international relations in the Middle East can best be understood as a series of overlapping contests, requiring multiple levels of analysis, and insights from multiple perspectives, in order to fully understand the region, including alliances and the balance of power:

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. It also underscored the salience of immaterial, ideational threats in the making of Middle East international relations (Salloukh 2015: 47).

Shifting Alliances and the Regional Balance after 2011

In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings, many of

the features of alliance dynamics remain key parts of regional politics, but there are also some notable changes. Regional politics is still characterized by fluid and shifting patterns of informal alignments, more so than more formal alliances in the sense of traditional defense pacts. But non-state actors (NSAs – from ISIS, to Hizbullah, to local militias) have played ever larger roles in regional politics, challenging traditional notions of states, security, and even of alliances. Regional politics has also been affected by major structural changes in the global and regional balance, with the decline of U.S. power and influence, especially since the disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the rise in influence of Russia and China. Despite its relative decline, the U.S., like the other P5 powers – Britain, France, Russia, and China – puts great emphasis on securing regional allies for its own interests.

Within regional politics, as the region descended into ever more instability, especially after 2011, many regimes were unsure which threats were most urgent to mobilize against. The main feature of the regional balance of power was that there really wasn't one. The traditional Arab power centers of Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad were now not agents of regional change but instead had themselves imploded into centers for domestic and regional struggles. In many respects, Arab regional politics was increasingly dominated by three non-Arab states – Iran, Israel, and Turkey. The Syrian war, meanwhile, became the focal point of struggle in a new regional Cold War, and even of global struggles over the outcome (Phillips 2016). The war not only pitted the Assad regime against rebel forces, but also saw Jihadist organizations enter the fray. Arab Gulf monarchies and the U.S. sent arms and financial support to select rebel factions. These were complicated (and sometimes temporary) alliances of global powers, regional states, and non-state actors. Similarly, the pro-Assad alliance in the Syrian war was rooted mainly in a coalition of Assad's forces plus Russia, Iran, and Hizbullah.

Despite the fact that it remained completely unresolved, the Arab-Israeli conflict had receded on the list of priorities of most regional states, as the region became embroiled in multiple civil and regional wars. Arab states were not

even going through the pretense of being concerned mainly with Palestinian rights; instead, Israel and Arab Gulf monarchies in particular focused mainly on Iran and its proxies. Interestingly, all of these states, Iran included, viewed militant Jihadist movements such as the 'Islamic State' (also known as ISIS or Da'esh) as key threats. Yet their many other points of rivalry and differing hierarchies of security threats seemed to prevent these same states from working together within a truly effective region-wide coalition against ISIS (Ryan 2015b).

Regional power Turkey played a strongly assertive role during the early years of the Arab Spring, supporting revolutions against secular regimes and the rise of new Islamist ones, especially the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt (2012-2013). But when domestic pressure and a military coup ousted the Brotherhood, it also ousted key regional allies Qatar and Turkey, and replaced them with fiercely anti-Brotherhood countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The external alliances, in short, followed changes in domestic politics, even as competing regional states attempted to affect domestic political outcomes. Differing levels of interventionism also turned on each states own self-conception in terms of roles and identity (as May Darwich shows in this collection).

Especially after 2011, a new Cold War emerged pitting essentially the conservative, Western-allied, monarchies on the one side, but no countervailing coalition of military-backed regimes on the other, unlike the original 'Arab Cold War' of the 1950's and 1960's (Kerr 1970). Instead, Saudi Arabia attempted to rally Arab monarchies together against Iran and its regional ambitions. Arab conflicts from Syria to Yemen were often portrayed by regimes in both power politics and sectarian terms: as proxy struggles between Saudi and Iranian-led blocs in the regional balance of power as well as struggles between Sunni and Shi'a alliances within regional politics (Bank and Valbjorn 2012, Gause 2014, Lynch 2016, Ryan 2016, Valbjorn and Bank 2007).

As the Saudi-Iranian cold war deepened in the post-

Arab Spring era, the sectarianism that both states fanned continued to fester across the region. This also led to competitive interventions in varying degrees in Syria and Yemen in particular, with disastrous consequences for Syrians and Yemenis caught in the crossfire of their own warring factions and especially between outside powers (Lynch 2016). Even as wars continued in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, yet another rift emerged within one of the few alliances left standing in the Middle East: the Gulf Cooperation Council. This rift pitted Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar, with the former accusing the latter (albeit technically a GCC ally) of meddling in their domestic politics, supporting terrorism, and otherwise harming regime security in their fellow Gulf states. While the GCC officially continued as an alliance, it was now an even hollower shell than it had been before. Bahrain seemed to cede its foreign policy to Saudi Arabia, while Kuwait attempted to act as mediator between its allies, and Oman remained almost neutral (while maintaining fairly close ties to Iran).

Even aside from intra-GCC rifts, the region's alliance politics in the era of the Arab uprisings was dominated by the Saudi-Iranian cold war. But the intensity of their rivalry yielded no bipolarity of hostile but stable alliance systems. Instead, the region continued to be characterized by multipolarity in every sense – military, economic, ideological – and a distinct lack of a balance of power. In this type of setting, alliances would continue to shift and adjust to various domestic and regional challenges to the security of the regimes across the region.

Conclusions

In the post-2011 era, regional alliances have drawn on the entire range of expected behaviors – balancing, bandwagoning, omnibalancing, underbalancing, budget security, and more. But all these machinations seemed to underscore the premium put on regime security by each of these states, including their reads of ideational, economic, and domestic political dissent as primary security threats, even stronger than external or more direct military ones. If anything, the relative decline of U.S. power seems to

have led states to be even more obsessive about their own regime security and the role of regional alliances in ensuring regime survival.

In terms of international relations theory, a full understanding of these regional alliance dynamics suggests the importance of the theoretical pluralism mentioned at the outset of this essay, especially given the weakness of states and regimes, and even of the structure of the regional system, as well as resurgent debates regarding identity politics across the region (Lynch, Ryan, and Valbjorn 2017). As Salloukh suggests, “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. It is far more rewarding to travel between theoretical paradigms than to engage in theoretical sectarianism” (Salloukh 2015). Many scholars of Middle East international relations seem to have “mastered this kind of theoretical eclecticism” and it is indeed essential in order to fully grasp the dynamics of regional relations and the shifting alliances of the modern Middle East.

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In America's Wake: Turbulence and Insecurity in the Middle East

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Since the Arab Uprisings, Middle East geopolitics has transformed from a system organized around and against a US-managed security architecture into a multipolar system lacking norms, institutions, or balancing mechanisms to constrain conflict and the use of force. This shift is a product of repeated US efforts to order the region through coercive force but also shaped by the emerging multipolar system at the global level. With regional Middle East states lacking a shared understanding of threats, US post-9/11 interventions failed to establish a stable regional security architecture. Instead, they generated intense insecurity for both rival and allied states while witnessing the proliferation of armed non-state actors. As the regional system has become more complex and multipolar, continued US reliance on coercion, rather than accommodation and compromise, has only intensified the forces of regional instability.

That structural realism cannot adequately map the Middle East regional system is not news. Transnational movements and ideologies have long been recognized as important in defining threats to regime security. Moreover, the relative levels of state consolidation, the permeability between domestic, regional, and global levels, and the disjuncture between regime, state, and social understandings of security have been critical to the development of distinct approaches to the study of the Middle East IR. Most recently, the rise of non-state actors is recognized as critical to understanding recent changes in the Middle East regional system.

Building from these insights, I suggest the current Middle East regional system is best understood as a model of "turbulence." By turbulence I mean a system with a proliferation of heterogeneous actors below and above the state level with expanded capabilities that complicate the dynamics of the regional politics. States remain the most powerful actors, but the definition of their interests and their capacity to achieve desired goals is diminished as

these states must negotiate a multidimensional geography of rival forces and actors within the context of increasingly multipolar global politics. The inefficiency of balancing, breakdown of regulatory norms, and increased capacities for self-organization by armed non-state actors all help sustain the regional environment of turbulence. The result is a turbulent regional system in which state interests are often hard to discern and shift in complex ways. Such an environment fostered the emergence of ISIS and complicates regional politics as states have to navigate a hyper-polar environment that gives greater leverage to smaller actors and makes the alignment of interests between states more contingent and fragile.

After (failed) hegemony

The rise of turbulence in the Middle East not a result of the retreat of the US or a consequence of a so-called "power vacuum," but a product of repeated American deployments of military force and its failure to engage in the necessary accommodations to promote balancing between regional rivalries. Many of the dynamics of turbulence emerged in the 1990s as countercurrents to increasing US power projection in the region and with the instituting of socially destructive neoliberal economic policies.

The post-World War II Middle East regional system has long been unstable, fraught with tendencies towards inter-state conflict and rivalry, but local and external actors often sought to balance against threats, limit escalation, and restrain revisionist actors including at times their own allies. In contrast, over the past two decades we have witnessed the erosion of mechanisms that mitigate and limit conflict. For a decade after the end of the Cold War, the major external powers seemed to prefer conflict management, balancing, and geopolitical stability. Since 2001, they have instead become agents of instability as they recklessly engage in intervention, regime change, and the arming of proxies.

The Middle East system was most radically transformed by the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, the US strategy of regional transformation, and more broadly its “global war on terror.” In addition to leading to state breakdown in Iraq as well as the rise of a domestic insurgency and the mobilization of transnational jihadists, the massive US military presence in the region and its disregard for norms of use of force and state sovereignty generated heightened insecurity among US rivals, such as Iran and Syria, as well as loosened normative restraints on the aggressive behavior of regional states and external powers. Iran and other US rivals sought new techniques to challenge American power by supporting armed militias, insurgent networks, and acquiring new military capabilities through local manufacturing and imports.

Following the US invasion of Iraq, processes of state erosion and territorial fragmentation, previously found in northern Iraq and southern Lebanon, spread across the region.¹ New networks of resistance were mobilized by armed militias, transnational terrorist groups, and underground insurgencies. The spread of the ability of non-state actors to buy or manufacture low-tech weapons, the diffusion of military expertise, and increased access to networks of communication, transportation, and trade enabled even the smallest militant groups and insurgencies to challenge state authorities and “secure” their local communities.² After 2010, these dynamics and support from regional and external powers enabled the rapid militarization of several uprisings and the outbreak of multiple civil wars leading to the fragmentation of territorial control in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya.

Amidst this regional turmoil, the “American era” in the region came to a close. Middle East states no longer look to the US, with its declining regional influence, to provide security or order. With each regional power seeking to reshape the regional system in their own interest, the result has been a failure to effectively balance against common threats or support allies aligned on opposing sides in regional “cold wars.” Rather, these states have excessively deployed military force and armed non-state militias leading to the fragmentation of centralized states and territorial control.

By 2011 a regional security architecture which had been based on progress towards Arab-Israeli peace, the containment of Iran, and diplomatic, economic, and military support for the security of US allied regimes was in disarray. The security interests of allied states began to diverge from that of the US and the immediate interests of each regime took priority over supporting US policy preferences. Meanwhile, the emergence of multipolarity at the global level— with Russia and lesser degree China seeking to gain leverage in the Middle East³— and the rise of multiple regional Middle East powers with rival goals, meant that the Middle East regional system was no longer either a unipolar system organized around the US or a bipolar system defined by Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

Under Obama the US downsized the quest for regional order due to its declining political leverage and the rise of new sources of regional instability. As the US could no longer manage regional order through balancing and deterrence, longstanding ideas about what constituted American core interests became highly contested. While the security of Israel and Saudi Arabia had long been central to US regional strategy, at times these states became obstacles to US policy initiatives to contain Iran, promote an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or limit the regional proliferation of arms. Meanwhile, regional actors, both US allies and rivals, came to feel more insecure and regional power rivalry and conflict increased leading to widescale intervention and deployment of military force in the “new Arab wars.”⁴

Even with the regional turmoil, during his second term, Obama could suggest that the US did not face pressing security threats from the Middle East. While “terrorism” and Iran’s regional role could be viewed as strategic challenges, these concerns failed to offer a guide for broader regional strategy.⁵ But rather than helping to establish balance between rival state powers, beyond the Iran deal regarding its nuclear program, the US only encouraged regional conflict by tolerating repressive regimes, offering arms and military support to allies, deploying coercive sanctions against rivals, and failing to engage mechanisms to address regional conflicts. Most striking was the contradiction between the continuing

deployment of military force against ISIS and the threat of “violent extremism,” while in the process failing to mitigate ongoing geopolitical and civil conflicts involving Yemen, Israel/Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

Meanwhile, like other states in the region, the US sought new tools and techniques to wield influence over, or else to contain, newly emerged networks of non-state actors. US special forces developed networked forms of warfare and counter-terrorism, while intelligence services backed both non-state militias and specially-trained local counter-terrorism units fostering the flows of arms and intelligence needed to sustain them.⁶

Regional powers and the production of insecurity

Without the US structuring the region’s alliances, rival regional powers have increasingly taken their own initiative. The Middle East regional system has become shaped by how rival states across the region’s multiple geopolitical divides each seek to influence and control state and non-state actors, with the result being a turbulent regional system in which state interests are often hard to discern and shift in complex ways.

A major feature of the evolution of the regional system from 2010 has been the relative marginalization of traditional powers such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria. Due to the domestic instability caused by uprisings and wars, these states have been constrained from projecting power and instead became subject to external influence. Meanwhile, other states— including Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine and Bahrain— have become politically fragmented and subject to geopolitical competition by regional and external powers.

In the process, a set of rival regional powers— Iran, Turkey, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia— emerged seeking, to different degrees, to project power beyond their proximate neighbors and offer an alternative set of norms and visions for regional order.⁷ The efforts of each of these newly assertive powers generally failed to recognize or accommodate the security interests of rival regional

states and their societies. The expansion of regional states eventually resulted in power rivalries that led to a new level of destructive civil wars, weapons proliferation, state fragmentation and humanitarian crises.

A major feature of the new regional dynamics has been the expansion of Iran’s regional leverage by promoting an alliance of state and non-state actors across Syria, Iraq and Lebanon largely in opposition to the influence and posture of the US. At the same time, Iran has sought to suggest norms for regional order based the legitimization and institutionalization of its relative power in regional politics while seeking to delegitimize the role of the US and Israel. Iran’s expanded influence meanwhile has generated insecurity on the part of its regional rivals, in particular the Arab Gulf States. These states have failed to effectively balance Iran due to their own rival interests nor accommodate Iran through a “grand bargain” that might stabilize the regional order.

In the late 2000s, the large, militarily capable state of Turkey and the small, wealthy state of Qatar began to use their diverse ties to states across the emerging regional divides to play a larger diplomatic role and promote conflict management. Turkey emphasized open borders and regional economic integration while Qatar used diplomatic inventions and pan-Arab media to project influence at the regional level. The political turmoil resulting from the Arab Uprisings and the confused US reaction to them opened another opportunity for regional powers. Qatar and Turkey sought to promote generally compatible efforts to suggest a new basis for regional order drawing together newly elected governments and emerging Islamist political forces. Their more activist policies, however, soon entangled them in regional conflicts. Qatar supported military intervention in Libya while Turkey encouraged armed opposition in Syria. Rather than transforming the political landscape these actions contributed to political breakdown and territorial fragmentation. Their efforts collapsed in the face of the 2013 military coup in Egypt. More broadly, a Saudi-led counter-revolution sought to shore up authoritarian governments, expand domestic divisions along sectarian

lines, and foster of civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. As Qatar scaled back its regional interventions, Turkey found its interests reorganized as the increasing autonomy of Kurdish actors, some backed by the US in an effort to contain ISIS, became its most pressing concern.

While aligned with the US and benefiting from the US security umbrella anchored by its bases around the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have attempted to organize the region through aggressive diplomatic and military interventions as well as financial support to allied regimes and proxies. Saudi Arabia has long sought to project regional influence, but its flows of cash, intelligence cooperation, and diplomacy have previously only had a marginal impact reshaping regional order. With the US under Obama no longer providing regional leadership, it's policies diverged from Saudi priorities, such as allowing the fall of Mubarak in Egypt and negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran. Saudi Arabia (with UAE support) then sought to act as a regional hegemon though without the needed regional power and consent. They backed rebel factions in Syria and escalated the conflict. After their effort to manage the post-Uprising transition in Yemen failed, they launched, with US support, an ineffective war against the Houthi rebels, which has resulted in a humanitarian disaster.

The Trump administration aligned itself more enthusiastically with the Saudi-UAE axis. Saudi efforts, despite this American support, have done little to establish a new regional order or contain Iranian influence. Rather than embracing Qatar's post-2013 shift away from an activist regional policy and attempt to rebuild GCC consensus policymaking, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have repeatedly sought to coerce Qatar into accepting a subservient role, resulting in the total fragmentation of the GCC as a regional organization. In past decades the US often sought to restrain Israel's most aggressive actions and/or worked to re-stabilize regional politics in their aftermath. Closer Saudi strategic alignment with Israel and backing by US president Trump has resulted in less restraint on regional actions. This posture sets up a context for continuing instability and a greater likelihood of conflict and escalation.

The current uncertainty and shifting regional political dynamics have set up complex rivalries and diverging interests between regional powers. While Iran, Turkey and Qatar have all sought to promote new, but differing, norms for regional politics, seeking to develop an order based around their interests, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have advanced a revisionist agenda built from a growing capacity and willingness to project power and intervene militarily across the region. These efforts by multiple regional and global powers to assert their own narrow strategic interests in the context of the post-uprisings Arab world has led to increased disarray in the region, including the fragmentation of Syria and Yemen, and massive humanitarian crises as a consequence of the conflicts there. This disarray opened up new opportunities for external intervention in the region, as seen in the NATO campaign in Libya, Russian intervention in support of the regime in Syria, and the US-led anti-ISIS military campaigns in Syria and Iraq during 2016 and 2017. Drawing on the notion of turbulence offers guidance to explain how and why the capacities of states in the region, even as they become more ruthlessly authoritarian and deploy more deadly military power, are less able to constrain threats to their security and balance rivals.

Endnotes

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- ³ Mehran Kamrava, "Multipolarity and Instability in the Middle East," *Orbis*, Fall 2018, pp. 602-4.
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- ⁵ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016.
- ⁶ Steve Niva, "Disappearing Violence: JSOC and the Pentagon's new cartography of Networked Warfare," *Security Dialogue* Vol. 44, No. 3 (2013): 185-202.
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Global/Regional IR and changes in global/regional structures of Middle East international relations

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The overall theme for this collection concerns the question about how changes in international structures at both the global and regional levels have and will affect Middle East international relations. One way to approach this question is by engaging in a discussion about whether the Middle East is in a transition from a post-Cold War ‘American order’ to some kind of ‘post-American’ (dis)order, where not only regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia but also non-Western great powers such as Russia and China aspire for a larger role in regional politics. In the following, a related yet somewhat different approach will be adopted. I will focus less on international relations than on the academic field of IR and discuss what these changes ‘out there’ might mean for the study of Middle East international relations ‘in here.’ In the following, I will do this by (re)visiting two debates in the scholarship on (Middle East) international relations.

Revisiting the classic debate on global vs. region-centric understandings of the Middle East

The question about the role of (changes in the) international structures for Middle East international relations is far from new. The current discussion can instead be seen as the most recent chapter in a book, where the opening chapter starts with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the modern Middle East. Thus, the debate over the relative importance of the global and the regional began almost as soon as there was even a concept of “the Middle East” as a distinct region. At the turn of the 20th century, Alfred Thayer Mahan, one of the first to use the very term ‘the Middle East,’ argued that it was nothing but ‘a shifting strategic concept [for an area that] had been and would be in the future a geopolitical no man’s land (...) destined to be a disputed area between Russia and the maritime powers.’¹ The interplay between regional and external players was also a key theme in the debate about the legacy of the 19th century ‘Eastern

question.’ L. Carl Brown, for instance, argued that the permeability of the Middle East for external powers was a key part of what had made the Middle East into a distinct regional system with its unique own logic.²

During the Cold War, the Middle East was often perceived through a global bipolar prism. But this view was challenged throughout. In the 1950s, Leonard Binder for instance argued that ‘policies based upon the assumption of global bipolarity will be unsuccessful in the Middle East...it is far more likely that the Middle Eastern states will feel compelled to act in terms of their own complex system so as to preserve their individual position within the Middle Eastern structure.’³ In a discussion about the US/Soviet influence in the Middle East during the Cold War, Fred Halliday similarly observed that if the superpowers’ relationship to the regional actors was to be grasped in terms of a ‘master-client relationship, it was not entirely clear which one was the master.’⁴

The question about the relative importance of changes in global and regional structures for the Middle East reemerged on the scholarly agenda in force after the end of the Cold War. While some such as Birthe Hansen argued that the Gulf War 1990/1 and the Oslo process was an outcome of the transition from bi-to uni-polarity at the global level, Efraim Karsh in turn asked ‘Cold War, post-Cold War: Does it make a difference in the Middle East?’ and answered this question with a ‘no.’⁵

At first sight, it may appear as if the previous chapters of this discussion have been polarized between those who view the global level as having profound structuring effects, and those who view regional dynamics as largely autonomous. However, this masks a large middle-ground trying, sometimes in very sophisticated ways, to grasp the complex *interplay between dynamics at global and regional levels*.⁶ Some of the lessons from these past debates may

also be useful for the current one about the emergence of a ‘post-American’ (dis)order in a Middle East with declining and rising new global and regional powers. Today, it therefore makes good sense revisiting some of the previous ‘chapters’ in this classic debate.

Visiting the Global/Post-Western IR debate

The classic debate on global versus region-centric understandings of Middle East international relations has traditionally been played out between discipline-oriented IR scholars and area specialists and has been closely related to the so-called Area Studies Controversy.⁷ In addition to this US – or at least Western – centric debate, there is another debate which has received much less attention in discussions about Middle East international relations. The debate in question is the one about what has been labeled as Global, Post-Western or Global South IR and the related issues concerning ‘geo-cultural epistemologies’ and the role of ‘the cultural-institutional contexts.’⁸

The debate takes its point of departure in Cox’s famous remark about how ‘theory is always for someone and for some purpose. There is ...no such thing as theory in itself divorced from a standpoint in time and space.’⁹ This is related to Hoffmann’s statement about how IR to a large extent has been an ‘American Social Science’¹⁰ and Wæver’s suggestion that ‘IR might be quite different in different places.’¹¹ In particular since the turn of the millennium, there has against this background been a growing interest within parts of the broader field of IR Theory concerning the development of IR scholarship beyond North America and Europe.

This has been reflected in a multi –dimensional debate in IR about 1) whether IR has been made “by and *for the West*”¹² and what, this means for our way of studying and understanding international relations; i.e. how have some issues/forms of knowledge been considered more important/legitimate than others; 2) whether and how it is possible to identify substantially different ways of studying international relations elsewhere; i.e. is the ‘international’ imagined in identical ways everywhere and is ‘security’

perceived differently in different places?¹³; and 3) which kind of analytical strategies are more likely to make IR Theory genuinely international, not only regarding what is studied but also when it comes to how and by whom; i.e., how can the ‘non-West’ to a larger extent become a ‘producer of knowledge’ rather than being only an ‘object of knowledge’ and how can insights from different places be connected in a genuinely international debate?¹⁴

Considering the prominence of Said’s critique of the ‘Western’ production of knowledge about the ‘East,’¹⁵ one might expect the study of Middle East international relations to be one of the fields where issues of ‘Global/Post-Western IR’ had been extremely prominent. This is, however, far from the case, despite the fact that the Middle East according the TRIP survey on theory and practice of IR around the world figures as one of the most studied regions ‘beyond the West.’ Instead, the Middle East has been surprisingly absent in the Global/Post-Western IR debates, which instead have been occupied by discussions concerning Chinese, Indian, Brazilian, Latin American or continental European IR.¹⁶ These issues have similarly only received limited attention among Middle East scholars (from the region and elsewhere).¹⁷

How Global/Post-Western IR Matters for This Debate

The neglect of this Global/post-Western IR debate does not appear viable any longer for those seeking to grasp the implications for the Middle East of changing structures at global and regional levels. It seems at least for two reasons necessary to engage with this debate.

First, if the emergence of a ‘post-American Middle East’ implies a growing and more independent role to regional actors and the rise of more region-specific dynamics, it is crucial to gain a better understanding of whether for instance the ‘international’ is thought and ‘security’ is perceived in the same way in the region as assumed by ‘universal’ IR theories usually developed (for the West?) by Western scholars. Bilgin, for instance, has brought attention to how discussions about ‘security’ in international relations to a larger extent should include

questions such as ‘what is security,’ ‘security for whom,’ ‘what is a threat’ and ‘a threat to whom.’¹⁸ Such a focus will not only bring attention to how security may be perceived very differently by different kinds of actors (also within the Middle East region). It may furthermore bring awareness to how debates about security in the Middle East often have concerned security for Western powers or local regimes and how this at times has been at the expense of attention to how an increased security for some may lead to an increased insecurity for other actors, such as the local populations.

An acknowledgement of the need for more attentiveness to local/regional perspectives does however also raise the question about how to do so, which is far easier said than done. Some advice on what (not) to do can be found in the broader debate on Global/post-Western IR, which has grappled with these issues for quite some time. A basic question concerns how to study and include local/regional ways of perceiving and practicing international relations, i.e., what kind of actors should be included/listened to (practitioners or scholars, elites or the broader public, state or non-state actors), what are the relevant sources (ancient or contemporary voices and documents), what kind of theories and approaches deserves attention (descriptive, explanatory, normative) etc.?

Similar to the strand of the ‘Chinese IR’-debate, which has examined what ancient Chinese sources have to say about the ‘international,’ it might be tempting to look for an ‘authentic’ and ‘truly indigenous’ understanding of international relations in the ‘Islamic Middle East.’ Both Western and Middle Eastern scholars have against this background studied what the Quran and classic figures such as ibn Khaldun, ibn Taymiyya or al-Marwadi allegedly have to say about *dar al-Harb/dar al-Islam, jihad*, or the *ummah*.¹⁹ However, the critique that has been directed at this kind of approach in the debate on ‘Chinese IR’ also seems relevant to consider in the present context. Often unintentionally, its proponents sometimes ends up reproducing classic orientalist stereotypes about how every aspect of the Middle East is defined by some Islamic essence. In turn, insufficient attention is paid to

the ambiguity of these sources²⁰ and to the question about whether policy-makers and other international actors are actually informed by these distinct ‘Islamic concepts and perspectives.’

Instead of looking for completely new and radically different “authentic” theories about Middle East international relations, others have taken their point of departure in the observation that students and scholars in the region to a large extent read and use the same academic texts as at Western universities. Against this background, focus has been directed to what happens when general IR theories, originally formulated in a Western context travel, are not only applied to but also used in other contexts such as the Middle East; in other words, what is it like reading Waltz in Riyadh, Wendt in Tehran or the Copenhagen School’s securitization-theory in Cairo? Some have seen this as reproducing IR’s Eurocentric underpinnings and a Western hegemony within IR. Others like Bilgin have suggested that “mimicry” may emerge as a way of ‘doing’ world politics in a seemingly ‘similar’ yet unexpectedly ‘different’ way.²¹

Yet another and partly related approach reflecting an ambition of including and incorporating local perspectives has given rise to what has been described as an emerging Beirut School of Critical Security Studies.²² It emerges from a transnational group of scholars from, working in, and/or with close ties to institution in the Arab world. With support from the Arab Council for the Social Sciences they have formed a working group on ‘Critical Security Studies in the Arab Region.’ This group has developed a series of research projects and training programs for students and junior scholars in the region based on alternative understandings of security that focus on the encounter with lived experiences of insecurity in societies in the Arab world and engage with knowledge production from scholars and institutions in the Arab world.

In addition to serving as a reminder of the importance of listening to and incorporating different kinds of local perspectives on the implications for the Middle East of changes in international structures at global and regional

levels (as well as of the potential pitfalls in such an endeavor), there is *another* reason why the post-Western/Global IR debate might be worthwhile a visit. While regional powers maybe are going to play a more prominent and independent role as the US dominance in the Middle East declines, few observers expect that extra-regional great powers will be absent in a future 'post-American Middle East.' On the contrary, many believe that other – and rivaling – great powers will be increasingly present in the region and challenge the United States' 'traditional' position in the Middle East.

This does not only raise the question about whether this marks the beginning of a 'new great game' or 'Eastern Question redux.' It also poses the question whether great powers such as Russia or China – and maybe India? – perceive and will engage with the Middle East in the same way as the United States – and Europe historically – have done. Will their approaches to the Middle East be based on other ways of imagining 'the international,' the Middle East and their own role as a great power involved in various parts of the world? For those interested in those kind of questions, it seems highly relevant to consult the

broader post-Western debate on whether or not, it makes sense speaking about, say, a distinct 'Chinese IR' and to what extent this actually inform Chinese policies; or is it rather so that great powers have certain kinds of interests making them behave in certain and quite familiar ways, for instance, in the Middle East – regardless of their official ideology, cultural background etc., as Waltz would have suggested.²³

By (re)visiting past and current debates on the study of (Middle East) international relations, it is possible to identify a range of tools and issues of relevance for those attempting at grasping the implications for the Middle East of changes in international structures at both global and regional levels. Thus, there is a long tradition among Middle East scholars for discussing the strengths and weaknesses of global and region-centric approaches and various sophisticated suggestions for how global and regional structures interact. By turning to the broader IR debates, it is moreover possible to identify the discussion about Global/Post-Western IR, which despite of the past neglect of the Middle East raises a number of issues also of relevance for the present context.

Endnotes

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Great and Regional Powers in the Middle East: The Evolution of Role Conceptions

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In the last few years, the United States has increasingly disengaged from direct involvement in the Middle East.¹ Despite Trump's withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal, his passive approach to Middle East conflicts is perhaps surprisingly aligned with this Obama policy of increased disengagement.² Instead of playing a direct role in shaping regional politics, the US is moving toward a more indirect role in approaching Middle East conflicts. This development in US role in the region provided opportunities for powerful outside actors including Russia and China to increase their presence in the region and position themselves as alternative partners and patrons.

The perceived change in external actors' roles by regional powers in the Middle East has led to major uncertainties and changes in their behaviour. Solvent authoritarian regimes— as in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar— adopted assertive regional policies to bolster their influence and ensure regime survival at the domestic level, often outmanoeuvring Western leverage. This change in behaviour is manifest in aggressive military interventions led by Gulf and Arab states in Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria,³ the establishment of Saudi and Emirati military bases in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean,⁴ the use of repressive policies against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Houthis at the regional level,⁵ and the adoption of harsh policies against regional actors viewed as rivals.

This essay argues, based on an interactionist perspective to role theory in foreign policy analysis, that a change in the role of external actors has led to significant change in the national role conceptions of regional actors. While several foreign policy theories were adopted to explain the change in regional actors' behaviour,⁶ these explanations overlooked the interaction between global and regional levels. A role-based argument starts from the premise that the foreign policy of regional actors is not only driven by interests and physical survival, but also by social positions and standing in the system, i.e. role. A perception of

change in the role of external actors (i.e. expectations) can prompt regional actors to change their roles at the regional level. The essay is structured as follow. First, I explore the interactionist perspective in role theory as a framework to examine the interaction between global and regional levels through the lens of role theory and how this interaction can shape behaviour at the regional level. Then, I offer some insights as to how a perception of change in the role of US in the region has engendered changes in regional actors roles.

Role theory and regional politics

Theorizing about the relations between external actors and world regions has evolved in the late 1980s with a group of scholars from various intellectual traditions who attempted to explain the evolution of regions and how these were shaped by international developments, namely the end of the Cold War.⁷ Buzan and Waever⁸ argue that in the post-Cold War order, regional security complexes (RSC) are autonomous entities but remain penetrated by powerful external actors.⁹ Penetration in this context is the process of alignment-making through which an external actor engages in a region's security structure.¹⁰ Accordingly, these external actors play a significant role in the constitution of regional structures.¹¹ Katzenstein argues, for example, that the US has shaped regional patterns of conflict and cooperation.¹² He shows how the United States has significantly shaped the evolution of regional structures (especially in Europe and East Asia) through the creation and maintenance of security alliances and the promotion of economic regionalism. Archaya¹³ argues that this process resembles 'socialization' in which external actors adapt and internalize the shared role expectation of regional actors, and this interaction between regional and external actors affects and shapes the region's social structure. The existing literature has often focused on the emergence of roles in some world's regions, such as the US role in East Asia,¹⁴ China's role in Africa,¹⁵ etc. Changes in

the role of a region's external actors and their impact on the region's structure remain remarkably undertheorized and understudied in the study of IR of the Middle East. Despite the long history of penetration in the region, the interaction between global and regional levels remains surprisingly undertheorized.

Role theory can be an analytical vehicle to study how changes at the global level can affect regional dynamics of cooperation and conflict. I adopt an interactionist role theory perspective grounded in foreign policy analysis to explain how the change in the US national role conception in the Middle East has led to change in the region's social structure and, henceforth, a change in regional actors' role conceptions and behaviour. According to role theory, a role is defined as 'a pattern of recurring action that performs a function within the context of a system of interacting elements or in a situation, e.g. the role of a carpenter is defined by the pattern of actions taken to build a house.'¹⁶ In his seminal work on roles, Holsti¹⁷ defines national role conceptions as 'the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions, suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems'. The role definition in IR is taken from the metaphor of a theatre play, where role is the part played by an actor as a character in social interactions with others. A growing number of role theorists have listed a number of social roles in the international system.¹⁸ Holsti has identified at least 17 types of national role conceptions, such as regional-subsystem leader, balancer, collaborator, independent, faithful ally, mediator-integrator, regional protector and protectee.¹⁹

National role conceptions reflect the social order in which a state is living. States operate in a social structure and acquire certain roles within that structure. Accordingly, an interactionist perspective to role theory offers a conceptualisation of the origins of roles in the interaction between individual states and role expectations from outside their borders.²⁰ Thies defines this interaction as 'socialisation', or a 'role location process' that 'occurs when an actor attempts to achieve a role for itself in the

system' and leads to a bargaining process between ego and alter expectations.²¹ Recent works within role theory explicitly posit that the adoption of a role by a state (ego) implicate others (alter) who respond through role change and adaptation.²² Changes in the role by significant players in that structure drive reactions from other actors (alter). Studies on the social order of world politics — i.e. Wendt's cultures,²³ Barnett and Adler's security communities²⁴ and Lake's hierarchy²⁵ — further argue that changes in the role of a region's external actor can substantially challenge established role sets in a social structure.

How role conceptions have changed

Since the end of the Cold War, the national role conception of US in the Middle East has been that of a 'hegemon'. In a region that has been constantly characterised as a multipolar system with no regional power capable of asserting supremacy, the United States has played the role of 'protector', 'security and stability guarantor', 'promoter of democracy', and 'mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict'. The United States has maintained the balance between different regional powers and prevented any regional actor to achieve hegemony through direct military interventions (such as in Iraq 1991) and security alliances with some of these regional powers, such as Israel. Furthermore, the US acted as a 'protector' of middle and small powers in the Gulf. Kenneth M. Pollack²⁶ described the US role in the Middle East until 2004 as follows: 'The United States became the ultimate guardian of the region's oil flows, the mediator of many of its disputes, the deterrent to its worst threats. The true hegemon of the Middle East'. These national roles asserted by the United States in the region have emerged as a result of the US self-description (*ego conceptions*) which coincided with regional actors' expectations of the US behaviour in the region (*alter expectations*).

Under the Obama administration, a new role conception for the US in the Middle East has evolved. The high bill of the Iraq war (2003), the cost of the intervention in Libya in 2011, the fear of bearing the costs of conflicts between regional actors, and the involvement in protracted civil wars are all factors that contributed to the change in the US national role conception toward the Middle East.

This change was manifest in the Obama doctrine, which relied on the belief that problems in the region are not amenable to solutions from the US. Instead, solutions can only be addressed by regional actors. As Obama explicitly stated, ‘The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians — which has helped to feed proxy wars and chaos in Syria and Iraq and Yemen — requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighbourhood and institute some sort of cold peace.’²⁷ In addition, the US should not bear the costs of being engaged in the Middle East alone, and other international actors, such as European countries, India, and China, should be involved. Hence, the US reacted differently to the Arab uprisings based on costs and incentives.²⁸ This inaction was manifest in the US lack of support or protection to some long-standing allies during the 2011 uprisings, such as Mubarak in Egypt. Furthermore, its hesitation to take a firm standing against Syria’s Assad was another major decision that marked a change in the US role in the region. Despite this choice of avoiding direct involvement in the region, the US maintained other indirect involvement, including supporting regional allies through arms sale. Yet, this change from direct to indirect involvement in the US role was perceived by regional actors as a key shift. Regional powers, who relied on US involvement in the region for security, did not only oppose this disengagement, but were also confused and uncertain as the US policies did not fit well-established roles.

The change in the US role has led to a perceived vacuum in the region, and thereby, changed its social structure, which influenced regional actors’ role conceptions and behaviour. For decades, Gulf countries, for example, have played the role of ‘mediators’ and ‘stability guarantors’ in regional conflicts; diplomatic relations and financial assistance were preferred over military and aggressive means. Furthermore, they have played the role of ‘faithful allies’ with a long-standing partnership with the US. These ‘faithful allies’ project themselves as willing to guarantee a favourable, stable regional order. Following, the US disengagement from the region, Gulf countries perceived the US as ‘abandoning’ its responsibilities in the Middle East in general and the Gulf in particular.²⁹

The lack of US support for the Mubarak regime in Egypt ignited aggressive reactions in the Gulf to rely on their own resources for survival against domestic threats.³⁰ Upon threat of cutting US aid from Egypt, the Saudi Kingdom and the United Emirates provided the Egyptian regimes with financial assistance.³¹ Mistrusting Washington’s willingness to guarantee its regional partners’ security, small and middle powers in the Gulf have also been boosting their military capacity and looking for independent means to assure the regional status quo.³² Since 2011, GCC countries’ military spending rose significantly.³³ The Saudi Kingdom became the largest military spender in the region and the third largest in the world in 2017. Saudi military spending increased by 74% between 2008 and 2015. It fell by 26% in 2016, but increased again by 9.2% in 2017.³⁴ The UAE was the second largest military spender in the region in 2014.³⁵ The GCC states have developed a suspicion regarding the US willingness to protect the region. Consequently, Saudi-led forces in Bahrain and Yemen have only informed the US of their military interventions without seeking approval.

Why role theory is essential

Scholars have adopted several logics to explore how the international system affects regional dynamics. Many more scholars tried to make sense of these regional developments and the rising assertiveness of some regional actors. Some focused on the distribution of power across regional powers based on the premise of rational actors. Other scholars examined domestic factors, especially the rise of a new generation of rulers in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, as the main driver of these regional developments.³⁶ This piece has argued instead that role theory offers a conceptual repertoire and framework to examine the evolution in relations between great powers and regional dynamics based on the interaction between national role conceptions and the expectations of the alter. Role change in the region’s external actors leads to a different social structure for the regional order and a change in roles adopted by regional actors. The retrenchment of the US from Middle East conflicts and the simultaneous rise of aggressiveness by small and middle powers in the region is a story of roles and counter-roles.

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Poverty, inequality and the structural threat to the Arab region

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External powers looking at the Middle East tend to focus on issues of high politics. That focus may blind them to the local, regional, and global factors which drive the ongoing political and sectarian tensions and armed conflicts across parts of the Arab region. Lurking beneath diplomatic maneuvering is a dangerous pattern of new and deep structural threats that have converged in a cycle of poverty, inequality and vulnerability that seems likely to keep the region mired in stress and conflict for decades to come. These threats exacerbate existing antagonisms and armed clashes across the region, heighten social tensions, and ultimately lead to the fragmentation of both individual countries and the wider Arab region that had enjoyed some minimal commonalities and integrity in the past century.

These threats include, most notably, chronic and growing poverty, a very high rate of labor informality, increased vulnerability among middle income families, continued high population growth rates that outstrip economic growth, and expanding disparities and inequalities in almost every sector of life and society. As these combine with other political and material grievances that are common among majorities of citizens (lack of water, affordable food, and decent housing, poor political participation and accountability, among others) they erode citizen trust in government institutions and lead to greater alienation among families that suffer two major pains: they feel they are not treated equitably, and are powerless to do anything about their condition.

Arab governments and their external sponsors tend to prioritize the wrong threats. Most Arab governments continue to introduce superficial reforms in pivotal sectors such as education, employment, and anti-corruption, but their efforts mostly remain unsuccessful or limited in their impact. Simultaneously, the broader Arab trend in most countries since the end of the Cold War around 1990 sees steadily increasing pauperization, vulnerability, perceived injustice and helplessness, and disparities. The

extent, causes, and consequences of this troubling trend are crystal clear, yet they do not seem to elicit any serious response from Arab governments. The Arab region and many individual countries are literally being ripped apart by the consequences of decades of incompetent, autocratic governance, combined with continuing foreign military interventions and the impacts of the century-old Arab-Israeli conflict.

The symptoms of the systemic crisis started to appear several decades ago. They could have been alleviated much more easily at the outset had governments been more effective in recognizing and tackling the issues that plagued their citizens, especially corruption, insufficient decent jobs, state cronyism, and declining educational standards. Rather than dealing with these early signs of serious mass internal dysfunction, regimes focused on military security and internal repression. The outcome was to exacerbate rather than solve the threats to social cohesion and national well-being, which in turn contributed to the brisk emigration of educated youth, the collapse of political parties, the rise of sectarian groups and militias, and steady expansion in adherents to both nonviolent and militant Islamist movements.

Poverty, inequality, and systemic economic crisis

The actual levels of poverty and vulnerability in the Arab region are higher than previously thought, with some two-thirds of citizens falling into the categories of poor or vulnerable. The realities of declining family wellbeing were disguised by prevailing poverty measures based on daily expenditures, which did not accurately capture two critical trends: high levels of poverty, and rising levels of vulnerability among families that used to be counted among the middle class or middle-income category, but have gradually fallen into the poor or vulnerable categories.

Significant research in recent years by economists

at UNDP, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the World Bank, and other institutions has used the Multi-Dimensional Poverty (MDP) measure to gauge poverty and vulnerability more accurately than the previous reliance on money-metric measures such as \$1.25 or \$1.90 expenditures per day. The Multidimensional Poverty Index, published by UNDP and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, offers excellent insights into this issue (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/2018-MPI>). The MDP approach more accurately measures real life conditions of families because it looks at a range of key indicators in health, education and living standards (including nutrition, child mortality, years of schooling, sanitation, electricity, drinking water, assets, and others).

The MDP figures indicate poverty rates as much as four times higher than previously assumed (partly because MDP captures the richest and poorest in society that money-metric expenditure measures did not). In ten Arab states surveyed by ESCWA, 116 million people were classified as poor (41 percent of the total population), and 25 percent were vulnerable to poverty. In Egypt, poverty increased from 19.5 percent in 2005 to 28 percent in 2015. If this level of 66 percent poor/vulnerable holds for the entire Arab world, it means that some 250 million people may be poor or vulnerable, out of a total Arab population of 400 million. The middle class in non-oil-producing states has shrunk from 45 percent to 33 percent of the population, according to ESCWA economists who have analyzed this issue. They see many middle income families sliding into vulnerability, and vulnerable families in turn falling into poverty.

The drivers of this increase in poverty and vulnerability have persisted or worsened since the 2010-11 Arab uprisings. They are likely to drive further families into poverty and vulnerability for years to come, given the current regional realities (wars, erratic tourism receipts and real estate and direct foreign investment levels, low real wage levels, stagnant economic growth and labor remittances, inadequate new job creation, and unreliable foreign aid levels, to mention only the most significant).

This trend seems to be directly associated with the steady recent decline in the quality of state-managed basic social services, mainly outside the Gulf region, including health care, education, water, electricity, transport, and social safety nets. The number of Arabs requiring humanitarian assistance to stay alive and minimally healthy, according to ESCWA calculations, is 60 million people in seven crisis states. They include many of the 30 million people who have been displaced in the Arab region in recent years.

Once families fall into poverty, they are likely to remain there for generations to come. The steady, large-scale growth in new jobs in industrial, tourism, agriculture, and service sectors that absorbed new labor market entrants in the half-century after the 1950s has disappeared. IMF and other projections say the Arab region must create 60-100 million jobs by 2030, and 27 million jobs in the next five years, to reduce unemployment significantly. This is clearly a task that is well beyond the capabilities of the current Arab state system and its private sectors. This suggests that informal labor will remain dominant for years to come in most Arab lands (averaging 55-60 percent according to some recent estimates); this means we should expect continued and growing poverty and vulnerability, due to the erratic and low pay and the lack of protections that informal workers suffer. Informal-labor-linked poverty is also a consequence of poor education outcomes, with some universal test scores indicating that as many as half the students in primary and secondary school across the Arab region are not learning, and many will drop out before completing primary or secondary education.

This exacerbates the worst of these trends, because low household education levels and poor early childhood development indicators, including stunting that is becoming more common, are now recognized as among the clearest signs that once families become poor today, they will be relegated to long-term poverty and marginalization. Long-term, cross-generational poverty now seems inevitable for families that suffer short-term setbacks in their income, because most Arab states are unable to generate the new decent jobs or provide the social services required to pull poor and vulnerable

families out of their miserable condition.

Recent studies indicate that the Middle East is the most unequal region in the world, with the top 10 percent of its people accounting for 61 percent of wealth (compared to 47 percent in the USA and 36 percent in Western Europe). Inequalities are documented in virtually every sector of life and society, including rural/urban, gender, income, ethnicity, and others, suggesting that this has become a deeply engrained structural problem rather than a fleeting phenomenon due to short-term economic stresses.

Poverty, vulnerability, and inequality have converged into a single dynamic that is deeply anchored in existing economic realities and state policy deficiencies that show no signs of changing appreciably, and consequently they will be difficult to reverse in the short term. Some Arab countries (including Egypt) have even reversed decades-old recent trends and registered a rise in fertility rates in the past five years, which will increase the demographic pressures on economic and social systems that have been unable to keep pace with population growth even when fertility rates were declining in recent decades. An estimated nine million Arabs are born every year (nearly two million in Egypt alone), all of whom will need education, health services, housing, water, and jobs that the Arab states already are unable to provide to the existing population.

Beyond the pain that this situation brings to poor and vulnerable families is the additional dangers that societies suffer, such as fragmentation, political instability, social, class, and sectarian tensions, citizen alienation from the state, and sometimes political violence, criminality, or illegal migration. External powers have done little to address these massive social and economic problems, and in most cases have supported regime policies which make them worse.

The Jordan example

Jordan offers a timely example of how social, economic, and political stresses on families lead to wider tensions

in society, ultimately generating serious splits between citizens and their state. From the late 1990s to 2018, for example, Jordanians significantly increased their perceptions of injustice and inequality in their lives, especially their treatment by the state and its institutions. Data from polls by the respected local consultancy NAMA, directed by Dr. Fares Braizat, shows those who say that justice does not exist in their lives increased from 8 to 24 percent in that period, and the perception of inequality increased from 10 to 30 percent.

These sentiments are especially high in rural areas and among those who migrated from rural to urban centers in recent decades; most of these citizens depend on state employment or other state-related income, have not benefited from private sector investments or jobs, and increasingly in recent decades have found themselves unable to meet their basic family needs. Polls by NAMA and the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan reveal some disturbing trends in family-level economic and political distress, including the critical perceptions of injustice that seem to be a crucial driver of anti-government protests.

Jordanians who see no justice in their lives increased from 40 to 46 percent in just the four months between June and September 2018, two-thirds of citizens feel the country is moving in the wrong direction, 72 percent of households said they could not meet their basic expenses (compared to 42 percent in mid-2011), and two-thirds of households reported their economic situation is worse than it was a year ago. The inability to meet basic household needs, or barely to do so but without being able to save any money, is also mirrored in regional polls by the Arab Barometer and the Doha-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, both of whose pan-Arab surveys indicate around 70-75 percent of families cannot afford to pay for their most basic needs.

Such families or individuals usually cannot access state resources through their members of parliament or other state institutions, ultimately finding themselves unable to improve their lives or ensure a decent future

for their children. They tend to express the highest levels of perceived corruption in the country, along with frustrations over what they see as an unfair system that discriminates against them, according to Breizat. They often respond “by self-alienating themselves from the state system,” he says, and find succor and representation in other arenas, such as tribal, religious, or militant ideological groups. “The combination of decreasing sense of equal opportunity matched with a rise in economic frustration, public disappointment, and negative expectations is indicating a similar public mood to that of April-May 2018 [when public protests toppled the previous government led by Hani Mulki],” he noted in an October 2018 article. “This significant attitudinal public support for protest action ought to be concerning to authorities.”

In fact, these combinations of family-level economic distress and widespread perceptions of inequality and corruption should be concerning to authorities across the Arab region, given the frightening reality of just how deep and severe these forces are, and how little is being done to redress them. One pertinent sign of this again comes from Jordan, where weekly demonstrations in front of the prime minister’s office in Amman resumed in late 2018, six months after the initial protests that triggered the change in government. This was because many and probably most middle class and poor Jordanians did not feel that the new tax law appreciably improved their life conditions.

Conclusion

Protests in the past year in Jordan and across the entire Arab region (Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Tunisia, Lebanon, and other lands) indicate fact that citizens are stressed by a debilitating combination of political and socio-economic factors in their lives. Many suffer from precarious socio-economic conditions as well as their lack of political power to address compelling issues like corruption, political accountability of the elite, and being treated with disdain by their state (the most dramatic example of the latter was the desire of the Algerian ruling elite to nominate President Abdelaziz Bouteflika for a fifth consecutive term, despite his near comatose physical and mental state, which makes

a mockery of the presidential election being an opportunity for citizens to voice their political views).

These powerful internal forces of discontent and public protest by large numbers of citizens across almost the entire Arab region have already started to impact on their states’ foreign policies and international relations, in several ways. In many situations where millions of citizens suffer sustained poverty and marginalization that leads to alienation from their state and society, large numbers of them (especially unemployed young men) join the reservoirs of vulnerable people who are easily recruited into militias, terror groups, and other organizations that impact both domestic calm and foreign relations. In some cases discontented citizens mobilize to vent their anger at their countries’ policies towards Israel (as happened in Jordan in 2018, when the king succumbed to public pressure and rescinded a clause in the 2004 peace agreement with Israel that allowed Israel to maintain control of a few patches of Jordanian land in the Jordan Valley). Turbulent conditions triggered by large numbers of dissatisfied citizens also prompt many of the best educated among them to emigrate, thus depriving the country of precisely the youthful talent and energy it needs to overcome its lingering socio-economic stagnation and political stresses.

Finally, when governments increase and harden security controls on their citizens in order to ensure “stability”, as many Arab countries have done since 2011, the result is usually the opposite – popular discontent rises, the ruling elite expands its powers and clientelist networks, economies lumber along without significant new growth or investments, the state relies more and more on external security and financial support to survive, and the cycle of pent-up discontent that exploded in the 2010-11 uprisings starts to build again. This should prompt scholars of international relations – along with the ruling elites of the Arab states in question – to examine more closely the worsening internal conditions of these countries, especially the mindsets of hundreds of millions of citizens whose attitudes and actions ultimately will determine the fate of their societies and the direction of the entire region.

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Friends with Benefits: China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Gulf

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In January 2016 President Xi Jinping paid state visits to Saudi Arabia and Iran, upgrading relations with both states to comprehensive strategic partnerships, China's highest level in its hierarchy of diplomatic relations. It was a deft balancing act, recognizing competing regional rivals within days of each other, and signaling that China would continue to pursue an unconventional path in intensifying its regional role on both sides of the Gulf.

Observers of Gulf politics may wonder how long China can manage this, with the assumption that sooner or later Beijing will have to get off the fence. However, a closer look at China's view on alliances and partnerships provides insights into how Beijing approaches developing relations in the Gulf. It is an important component of a long-standing strategic hedging approach to building influence that China has used effectively during the unipolar era, taking advantage of the US commitment to maintaining the Gulf status quo in order to develop relations with all states in the region. Beijing's Gulf strategy is therefore an example of a regional policy shaped by pressures and opportunities at the international level. As the international system looks set to transition from a US-led order to an as-of-yet undefined one, regional orders will transition as well, and China's hedging in the Gulf may position it as an important external actor. Its partnership diplomacy, vague but inclusive, is an important factor in building that role.

Chinese Thinking on Partnerships

China's non-alliance strategy has been in place since the 12th Party Congress of 1982, when Deng Xiaoping articulated "an independent and self-reliant foreign policy of peace." This was a natural outcome of a more modest foreign policy orientation that Deng introduced upon taking power in 1978, the beginning of the Reform Era, as Chinese leaders realized that the excesses of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) had weakened them both at

home and abroad. In order to address a severe domestic development lag, China needed a stable international environment, and its leaders sought to reassure states that were previously threatened by the PRC's revolutionary zeal during the Cultural Revolution.

To this end, Beijing adopted its partnership policy. There is a scale of relations, ranging from a friendly cooperative partnership at the bottom to a comprehensive strategic partnership at the high end. (see Table 1) Each of the five categories of relations features specific priorities, signaling the level of importance Beijing attaches to that particular state. Relationships can be upgraded depending upon the progress made, as in the case of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with which China established a strategic partnership in 2012; during President Xi's state visit in 2018, the China-Emirati relationship was elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

Table 1: Levels of Chinese Strategic Partnerships

Partnership	Priorities
Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	Full pursuit of cooperation and development on regional and international affairs
Strategic Partnership	Co-ordinate more closely on regional and international affairs, including military.
Comprehensive co-operative partnership	Maintain sound momentum of high-level exchanges, enhanced contacts at various levels, and increased mutual understanding on issues of common interest
Cooperative partnership	Develop cooperation on bilateral issues, based on mutual respect and benefit
Friendly cooperative partnership	Strengthen cooperation on bilateral issues such as trade

Source: South China Morning Post, "Quick guide to China's diplomatic levels," January 20, 2016

The literature on strategic partnerships focuses on several common features, the most important being an emphasis on flexibility while limiting explicit commitments. There is an understanding that relations in a strategic partnership will not be purely cooperative, but that the two states will work to manage “unavoidable conflicts so that they could continue to work together on vital areas of common interest.”¹

Nadkarni describes a strategic partnership as a “diplomatic instrument that allows for hedging against all eventualities while allowing for the common pursuit of mutual interests.”² Struver describes them as “flexible interstate relations intended to serve the pursuit of political, security, and economic objectives in a globalized world” that are process-oriented means of “cooperation for the sake of cooperation.” He also highlights that they are goal-driven rather than threat-driven, an important contrast with alliances.³ Analyzing China’s practice of strategic partnerships, Goldstein offers a four-point description, calling them a commitment to:

- Build stable bilateral relationships without targeting a third state
- Promote deep economic engagement
- Focus on cooperation in areas of mutual interests while not focusing on domestic affairs of potential disagreement
- Routinize official visits and military exchanges⁴

Taken together, these provide a useful framework of understanding China’s choice to use strategic partnerships rather than alliances.⁵

To understand how Chinese officials perceive these partnerships in practice, it is instructive to see former Premier Wen Jiabao’s comments when defining the features of the China-European Union comprehensive

strategic partnership, demonstrating that the features of this comprehensive strategic partnership are consistent with the values and commitments described in the literature:

By ‘comprehensive,’ it means that the cooperation should be all-dimensional, wide-ranging and multi-layered. It covers economic, scientific, technological, political and cultural fields, contains both bilateral and multilateral levels, and is conducted by both governments and non-governmental groups. By ‘strategic,’ it means that the cooperation should be long-term and stable, bearing on the larger picture of China-EU relations. It transcends the differences in ideology and social system and is not subjected to the impacts of individual events that occur from time to time. By ‘partnership,’ it means that the cooperation should be equal-footed, mutually beneficial and win-win. The two sides should base themselves on mutual respect and mutual trust, endeavor to expand converging interests and seek common ground on the major issues while shelving differences on the minor ones.⁶

Why not Alliances?

The risk of entrapment – “being dragged into a conflict over an ally’s interests that one does not share, or shares only partially”⁷ - features significantly in Beijing’s thinking about the potential problems with Middle Eastern alliances. Liu and Liu’s survey of official attitudes towards alliances in China describes an orthodox view of “an archaic and entangling system that only increases the chances of costly military conflict.”⁸ A loose, nonbinding and interest-based approach to partnerships solves the alliance security dilemma, albeit at a cost: it creates the perception of an opportunist and potentially unreliable partner. There is considerable debate within China on the benefits of adopting alliances, but for the time being it is academic, as the non-alignment principle continues to guide diplomatic practice.⁹

Beyond the reluctance to become entrapped in alliance partners' conflicts, there is a structural explanation for China's aversion of alliances in general and Gulf alliances in particular. Post-Cold War unipolarity has provided rising powers like China with a unique strategic opportunity to develop power and influence without facing overt challenges from the USA. Balancing against the USA during the unipolar era would not advance China's interests, but at the same time neither would bandwagoning nor neutrality. Active balancing is too risky, and bandwagoning or neutrality are not consistent with Chinese ambitions.¹⁰ Instead, China has taken advantage of the relative stability provided by US preponderance to develop strong ties with strategically important states around the world. These relations have been built mostly on economic foundations, but as they become increasingly multifaceted, there is a corresponding growth of strategic considerations. This is happening in the Gulf, as China has transitioned from a distant power of marginal influence to the largest trading partner in the region, with increasingly expansive interests with the Gulf monarchies, Iran, and Iraq.

While this approach has been derided as freeriding, most notably by President Obama,¹¹ it is more useful to understand it as an example of successful strategic hedging. Successful hedgers improve their competitive abilities while avoiding conflict or confrontation with the region's dominant power.¹² In a competitive regional dominated by the USA, China has had to build a regional presence that does not alienate the USA or any Gulf states while pursuing its own interests. Strategic partnership diplomacy has provided the space to methodically build up its economic relations while the US security umbrella provided a low-cost entry into the Gulf. Beginning with trade, the economic ties became increasingly multifaceted and sophisticated, incorporating finance and investment. As Struver's description of strategic partnerships anticipates, the relationships have progressed beyond economic to include political and security objectives, but in a way that has consistently allowed Beijing to sit on the

fence in a competitive regional environment. Alliances would force China to pick a side; strategic partnerships allow it the flexibility of being everyone's friend.

China's Gulf Partnerships

China's partnership diplomacy in the Gulf began when then-Premier Wen Jiabao visited the UAE in 2012 and established a strategic partnership. Since then, every state in the region except Bahrain has signed either a strategic or comprehensive strategic partnership with China. (see Table 2). This growing diplomatic attention to the Gulf can be attributed to a number of factors. First, China-Gulf trade has seen substantial growth this century. China-GCC trade volume, valued at just under \$10 billion in 2000, had increased to \$123 billion by 2016. Trade with Iran and Iraq saw similar spikes. China-Iran trade grew from approximately \$2 billion in 2000 to over \$31 billion in 2016, and China-Iraq trade increased from \$975 million to nearly \$19 billion over the same period.¹³ Another important factor is the nature of this trade. Energy dominates, with over 50% of Chinese oil imports coming from the Gulf states.¹⁴ This makes for a particularly important set of relationships for Beijing and Gulf exporters, who look to East Asia in general and China in particular as a reliable long-term energy export market. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is another important factor, and underscores the increasingly strategic component of China's Gulf orientation. The signature foreign policy of President Xi's administration, the BRI is a series of Chinese-led maritime and overland infrastructure development programs across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean. This is extending Chinese influence and interests far beyond its traditional East Asia sphere, and with the Gulf's geostrategic location connecting several important states and regions in the BRI, the Chinese government places a premium on Gulf stability, evident in the fact that seven of eight regional states have the two highest levels of diplomatic relations with China.

Table 2: China's Partnerships with Gulf States

State	Level	Year Signed
Bahrain	-	-
Iran	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016
Iraq	Strategic Partnership	2015
Kuwait	Strategic Partnership	2018
Oman	Strategic Partnership	2018
Qatar	Strategic Partnership	2014
Saudi Arabia	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016
United Arab Emirates	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2018

It is not surprising that Saudi Arabia and Iran were chosen as comprehensive strategic partners; they are the dominant regional states, and both are important trade partners for China. The elevation of the UAE is indicative of Beijing's view of it as an increasingly important regional actor, made explicit in the joint communique in which the Chinese side praised "the constructive role being played by the UAE in regional affairs."¹⁵ A Chinese Gulf specialist said that from China's side, the UAE is perceived as having several advantages over its neighbors that contributed to its elevation to a comprehensive strategic partnership: its relative political stability, its position as a regional logistics and infrastructure hub, and its business-friendly trade and investment environment.¹⁶

What are the prospects of the other Gulf states also moving to a comprehensive strategic partnership? Struver's research indicates that Chinese leaders are especially cautious with partnerships at this level, with three conditions needing to be met: high levels of political trust, dense economic ties, and good relations in other sectors

such as cultural exchanges. Beyond the structure of the bilateral relationship, the state's stature in global affairs is an important consideration; Beijing only considers this level of partnership with states that "play an important role international economics and politics."¹⁷ Given these requirements, it is unlikely that other Gulf states would be elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership. China-Qatar relations are quite dense but not at the same level as the UAE or Saudi Arabia, and given Qatar's ongoing dispute with the self-styled Anti-Terror Quartet (Saudi, Egypt, Bahrain and the UAE), it is more likely that Beijing continues to pursue quiet diplomacy.¹⁸ Oman's relations with China are also deep, and with the Duqm port project, indicates a more strategic direction. Economically, however, Oman is less important to China, making it an unlikely candidate. Iraq does not meet any of the three conditions, and because Bahrain has no formal existing partnership with China and bilateral trade is negligible, there is no chance that it will be considered.

For the time being then, China's approach to the Gulf will largely rest on the three pillars of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. If this is the case, there are two likely scenarios. In the first, Beijing prefers a US-led status quo under which it can continue to hedge, building relations with minimal security responsibilities. In this view, China's regional presence quietly reinforces the US-led Gulf order, taking advantage of and, in the process, supporting it. Alternatively, it anticipates an emerging regional security order which includes Iran, and in which US hegemony is therefore challenged. Given China's ambitions, evident in the BRI, the second scenario seems more likely, and if this is the case, Chinese leaders are quietly and patiently laying the groundwork for a post-hedging role in a future Gulf order.

This is not to say that leaders in Beijing perceive China as a future Gulf hegemon. It currently enjoys the benefits of friendship without the costs of leadership, an ideal situation for a state looking to maximize its regional presence under the US security umbrella. A more realistic approach is to prepare for a regional order characterized

by competition among Gulf states, with a number of extra-regional powers, including a deeply-entrenched USA along with India, Japan, South Korea, Russia, and China among others - all of which have a stake in Gulf stability - working to ensure that this competition does not lead to conflict.¹⁹ In such an environment, China's strategic partnership diplomacy has it well-positioned to protect its interests and continue developing a deeper and broader regional footprint.

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Is the Middle East the Transatlantic Achilles' Heel?

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The transatlantic relationship has suffered two large fallouts in the last two decades triggered by divergences over Middle Eastern policy issues: the U.S. invasion of Iraq (2003) and the US withdrawal from the Joint and Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran (2018). The Iraq war drove a deep wedge through Europe, while the United States considered European participation in the military operation as desirable but dispensable. In 2018, by contrast, an interest-led, united European front in favor of the JCPOA prevents Washington from unfolding its economic warfare against Iran to full effect. But while the European consensus on the JCPOA appears solid, EU member states display considerable nuance on other Middle Eastern policy dossiers.

The Trump administration's aggressive rhetoric creates the impression that Europe and the United States no longer want the same things in the Middle East. As Brussels and Washington steer towards a head-on confrontation on trade, for the first time since the Suez crisis, Europe and the United States are actively trying to undermine each other in a region that is of core geopolitical interest to both. The return of Russia to the Middle East has further boosted the region's geopolitical significance by linking up the two big arches of crisis, from Morocco to Pakistan and from Eastern Europe to Russia, placing the Middle East at the conjunction of both.² Transatlantic policy divergences are not new, but the current tectonic shifts in global political order and the Trump administration's hostility towards multilateral institutions poses an unusually sharp challenge to a decades long strategic alliance.

What are the implications of the transatlantic drift on the Middle East? A major risk is the creation of new power vacuums which leave the field to actors with aggressive

expansionary agendas that will jeopardize the outlook of stabilization. In the current dynamics, the game in the Levant is increasingly negotiated between Russia, Iran, and Turkey, leaving the U.S. and the EU at the margins. Transatlantic divergence and reluctant action on the Middle East play directly into Russia's hands, and Putin has been lobbying the Europeans to de-couple themselves from U.S. leadership in the Middle East. Transatlantic rivalry in the Middle East will not only lead to further destabilization of the Middle East against EU and U.S. core interests, but also hand Putin an ever-greater toolbox to play transatlantic partners against each other across multiple geopolitical arenas.

The Two Pillars of Middle Eastern Geopolitics

Two big policy dossiers form the backbone of current Middle Eastern geopolitics: the role of Iran in the region, and the position of Israel vis-à-vis its neighbors. These two pillars structure most of the ongoing conflicts in the region, from Syria to Yemen, and from the GCC crisis to Gaza. It is precisely on these two dossiers that European views and those of the Trump Administration have most drifted apart. Disagreeing on approaches to Iran and Israel/Palestine in practice means disagreeing on the overall vision for the region.

There is a great deal of continuity on both sides of the Atlantic, but also a number of marked differences in how key challenges are weighed and processed. Both agree that Iran must be prevented from going nuclear and that its regional aggressive expansionism must be halted, both are concerned by terrorism and ISIS, and both want to see regional stability. They fundamentally disagree, however, on how to accomplish those goals.

¹ An extended version of this article was published by the German Marshall Fund under the title "Balancing Trumpism in the Middle East" in December 2018.

² Interview with Klaus Naumann, former Chairman of the NATO Military Committee: Europa in the Turbulenzen der Weltpolitik, Zentrum Liberale Moderne, 19.7.2018.

There is considerable continuity from Obama to Trump in terms of a general view that the United States should avoid costly military commitments in the Middle East. But the two administrations differ profoundly on the value of multilateral cooperation and diplomacy. Martin Indyk has suggested that the Trump doctrine for the Middle East consists in an assessment of the region as a hopeless “troubled place” whose wars and crises are not America’s. This means embracing Middle Eastern allies regardless of political credentials, and have them bear the burden of regional security.³

By contrast, the European perspective on the Middle East is informed by a tangible interest in de-escalation to prevent Middle Eastern conflicts from further haemorrhaging into Europe in the form of refugees and jihadis. The 2015-16 refugee crisis has radically changed the way the region is perceived in Europe by turning Middle Eastern security into a decisive electoral factor that directly impacts on the European Union’s internal cohesion by fueling the rise of an anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic political current. Europe tends to see a greater role for multilateral cooperation and non-military forms of engagement.

Many in the American national security apparatus agree with European views on the need for a comprehensive, multi-layered approach to the region. But at the same time, many believe that the Europeans either underestimate or disregard the degree and impact of Iran’s regional roguery. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are largely uncritically embraced by the Trump Administration as close allies in defending the region from an Iranian take-over. The Europeans, too, are concerned by Iran’s regional behavior, but also stress the need for Israel, the Sunni Gulf States and Russia to make concessions.

Iran: The Road to Containment

While the European consensus on maintaining the JCPOA is solid, France and the UK in particular share

Washington’s desire to put greater pressure on Tehran regarding its regional behavior. Beyond the narrative of ripping apart a bad deal, no meaningful contingency plans have been put in place by Washington beyond economic sanctions. While the general deterrence course outlined by Secretary Pompeo included a number of elements by which Iranian containment is meant to be achieved, it remained unclear what means will be employed to put those measures into practice. In addition, the Trump Administration’s unambiguous alignment with Israel further fuels regional polarization by contributing to the build-up of a regional anti-Iranian front. Seizing the momentum of the U.S. and Gulf backing, the Israelis might even feel emboldened to escalate militarily with Iran.

The Europeans have an only slightly more tangible plan regarding Iran. While the E3 continue their efforts to hold up the agreement despite the withdrawal of the United States, they also seek to build on the relationship established with Tehran through the JCPOA. As EU High Representative Federica Mogherini has pointed out on countless occasions, the Union hopes that continuous dialogue and confidence-building with Iran will gradually open channels to envisage similar agreements on missiles and other regional dossiers, including via the newly launched EU/E4 (the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom) dialogue on regional issues with Iran. At the same time, senior EU officials acknowledge that they do not expect to be able to keep the JCPOA alive if Trump gets reelected in 2020, and that there is no Plan B. Beyond the JCPOA, France and the UK are pressing for a much more demanding course towards Tehran that contrasts with the EU institutions’ socialization approach.⁴ It has been often stressed that the EU’s fervent defense of the JCPOA has been partially fueled by an intent to safeguard the bloc’s most important foreign policy success at a time when the Union’s legacy is under unprecedented stress from within.

³ Martin Indyk: A Trump Doctrine for the Middle East, *The Atlantic*, 14.4.2018.

⁴ Riccardo Alcaro: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Europe’s Uncertain Role in Middle Eastern Geopolitics, IAI Policy Brief, May 2018.

Palestine and Israel

The other big clash and a marked example of European balancing of what they see as irresponsible US policy shifts is on Israel and Palestine. The decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem announced in December 2017, observers agree, was about US domestic politics and had very little connection to its impact on the Arab-Israeli peace process. From Trump's perspective, it was an easy domestic win with his pro-Israeli core electoral base, with maximum symbolic impact at almost no cost. At the same time, the move fit into the recent US approach of tough love for the Palestinians paired with an unambiguous pro-Israeli bias in an apparent attempt to break the status quo of the stalled peace process.

The move, heavily criticized across Europe, has driven a second wedge between the White House and European governments. Despite initial hesitation in some European capitals of whether taking a firm stance on Palestine was worth another quarrel with the White House, the European consensus held, and consolidated. The Europeans have since implemented a number of policies to back up the Palestinians, such as directly countering Trump's sharp rhetoric with unambiguous statements or filling the funding gaps in UNWRA to help Palestinian refugees.⁵ Some European governments, such as Spain, have publicly considered the formal recognition of the State of Palestine.

The background to the prospective draft peace plan being hatched by Jared Kushner provides a glimpse of the Trump Administration's objectives in Israel and Palestine. In the face of the stalled peace talks, Kushner's plan was born out of a desire to try something entirely different, again parting from past policies and traditions in a deliberately disruptive way. Instead of reshuffling the same ideas successive U.S. governments have tried for the past 15 years, the new plan reportedly consists of a

gloves-off approach towards the Palestinians alongside an unambiguous alignment with Israel. Awaiting the plan to come into the open, close observers expect disruption as the main theme but there seems to be no ambition to bring both sides closer together.

EU member states have traditionally tended to overlook what they perceived as a biased US position on Israel/Palestine to preserve their good relations with the United States. The recent turns taken by the Trump Administration, followed by the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, however, might have turned the tide on Europeans' permissiveness on Palestine. Indeed, harsh European condemnations of Trump's Jerusalem announcement contrasted with tame reactions from Arab governments.⁶ Despite this, Europeans have not come up with any better idea to break the deadlock in the stalled peace process. Senior Israeli foreign ministry officials expect France to come up with its own peace plan should the U.S. government fail to present the long-awaited plan hatched by Kushner following the November 2018 mid-term elections. A new outbreak of violence in Palestine might well thrust Europe into the traditional American role of the intermediary between Israelis and the Palestinians if the Trump Administration continues to signal so clearly that it is no longer interested in this role.⁷

The Big Proxy Wars, At Arm's Length

Divisions on transatlantic takes on the two pillars of Middle Eastern geopolitics partially condition U.S. and EU policy in the major proxy conflicts in Syria and Yemen.

Throughout the Syria conflict, Europe has seen its interests frustrated and its influence sidelined. Via a channel of talks between Iran and the EU/E4 on regional issues, the Europeans have been able to discuss both Syria and Yemen with Tehran, albeit without any breakthroughs. At the same time, the leading European powers increasingly

⁵ Jon Stone: EU pledges €42.5m extra aid to Palestinians after Donald Trump cuts US contribution, *The Independent*, 31 January 2018

⁶ Gol Kalev: The Battle for Jerusalem: Europe vs. the United States, *Jerusalem Post*, 16 December 2017.

⁷ James Traub: RIP the Transatlantic Alliance, 1945-2018, *Foreign Policy*, 11 May 2018.

place their bets on bilateral channels to preserve some influence. Europe's main bargaining chip in Syria remains its economic power. The largest humanitarian donor to the Syrian people, since the beginning of the war, EU and member states have jointly contributed over €10.8 billion in humanitarian, development, economic and stabilization assistance.⁸ Regarding European post-war reconstruction aid and the lifting of sanctions, Europe's constant line has been to make both conditional to an inclusive political process. If the Assad regime regains full control of Syria and keeps rejecting any meaningful inclusionary process, an already marginal Europe could be pushed to the sidelines by losing its most important lever of influence.

The US assessment on Syria has shifted only slightly from Obama to Trump. While Obama prioritized the fight against ISIS and opposed Assad but without being prepared to do much about it, Trump prioritizes ISIS and opposes Iran but without being prepared to do much about it. Trump's desire to avoid further U.S. military engagement and financial strain translates into no formal broadening of the U.S. military mandate beyond ISIS, and no meaningful role in post-war reconstruction. Some voices in Washington have been hoping the U.S. can strike a deal with Russia, defeat ISIS and get out. Trump has long made clear that all he cares about in Syria is ISIS, although more recently, senior state department officials assure troops are here to stay and that Iran's presence in Syria is a decisive factor in this decision. The Trump administration has also frozen aid money for Syria and programs are being shut down including post ISIS stabilization work. Paradoxically, all these measures are in direct contradiction to Trump's tough rhetoric on Iran, which would likely be the first benefactor of further vacuums in Syria.

The Europeans have remained largely in sync with US positions, joining the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS and retaining their (however waning) opposition against Assad. In April 2018, French and British forces joined the U.S. in launching coordinated airstrikes in response

to Assad's use of chemical weapons. Beyond symbolic military and political action, however, the Europeans have been struggling to claim a political role in Syria alongside their humanitarian efforts on the ground.⁹ As the conflict tilts in favor of Assad, EU unity over Syria falters and U.S. engagement remains uncertain. The Europeans have been worried over the possibility of a U.S. withdrawal from Syria as they need the U.S. to counterbalance the Russian and Iranian presence. At the same time, Russia has been pressing hard for the Europeans to pick up the reconstruction bill regardless of Assad's future and has been keen on Europe to act independently from the U.S.. In October 2018, France and Germany publicly teamed up with Russia and Turkey to secure the implementation of the Idlib agreement, in which the Europeans have a strong interest as a measure to prevent a further refugee exodus. By joining an ongoing conversation between the Astana powers, France and Germany attempt to preserve some influence in a dossier that is increasingly being negotiated between Russia, Iran, and Turkey. In doing so, Europe is increasingly de-coupling itself from U.S. leadership as the U.S. remains ambiguous on its engagement in Syria and is unwilling to pay for reconstruction in what could be a joint bid for renewed leverage in a post-conflict setting.

Concern for the region's other big proxy war, the ongoing humanitarian disaster in Yemen, is shared across the Atlantic, in particular in the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament. Formal U.S. policy statements, however, barely veil the Trump Administration's preference for the Sunni Arab coalition to prevail via military victory. Among both Republicans and Democrats in Washington, there is a hard line against Iranian aggression in the Middle East, and Yemen is seen by many as prime example of where the U.S. should be pursuing a countering policy. Calls by Congress and others on Trump to exert more pressure on Saudi Arabia on the Yemen dossier have gained more weight after the outcry over the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi

⁸ European Union: The EU and the Crisis in Syria: Factsheet, 24 September 2018.

⁹ Richard Youngs: Boosting the Localist Approach in Syria, Carnegie Endowment, 2018.

in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul has led many to put in question Washington's close partnership with Saudi Arabia. Such a move would bring the U.S. closer to the European position. However, these hopes were shattered by an unambiguous statement by Trump in November 2018 geared at reassuring Riyadh of his full backing.¹⁰

U.S. and British defense contractors have been the main financial benefactors from the Yemen war, reaping huge benefits from their arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The U.S. is the largest arms suppliers to Riyadh with \$8.4 billion worth of sales since 2014, followed by the UK (\$2.6 billion), and France (\$475 million).¹¹ The United Kingdom, the dominant EU member state in the Gulf including on the Yemen dossier, is also the first European weapons supplier and has on numerous occasions provided political cover to the Sunni Gulf States. Alongside the UK, France, Sweden, and Spain are major arms supplier to the Gulf states involved in the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, and all have disregarded periodic calls for an EU-wide ban on arms sales to these states, including two European Parliament Resolutions. EU member states Germany, Denmark and Finland, however, have banned arms sales to Saudi Arabia in the wake of the Khashoggi murder. Unlike the U.S. government, whose support to Saudi Arabia and the UAE has been critical to the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, the Europeans have retained working relations with all the parties and have provided consistent support for UN efforts to broker a ceasefire and mediate peace talks. The EU is therefore seen as comparatively neutral.¹² The recently launched dialogue between the E4/EU and Iran over Yemen displays a European willingness to follow on to the engagement strategy with Iran. Greater coherence and unity in terms of arms sales to the Gulf states would greatly increase Europe's political weight in such talks.¹³

Conclusion

The split over the Iranian nuclear dossier reflects increasing divergence across the Atlantic not only on key Middle Eastern policy issues, but also on the ways the emerging international system should be navigated. The politics of global transformation, the state of the transatlantic relationship, and key Middle Eastern policy dossiers are inextricably linked.

The EU/E3 and the current U.S. Administration share similar threat perceptions but weigh and process them very differently. While there is convergence in core interests, as well as constructive cooperation in a number of areas, they clash namely on the two fundamental policy dossiers that condition most other hotspots in the current Middle Eastern multipolar system: Iran and Israel/Palestine. As long as European and U.S. policy on these two dossiers clash, effective transatlantic cooperation on sustainable Middle Eastern security will be unfeasible. In digesting Trump, European political elites have gone through three phases: denial, waiting-it-out, and fighting back. Balancing Trumpism, Europe has decided to counter U.S. policies whenever Trump crosses a red line. It has already embarked on a path of its own on Iran, and has started doing so in Palestine and Syria.

EU and U.S. positions in the big regional proxy conflicts point to a larger commonality in their respective Middle East policies: the gaping abyss between objectives proclaimed and means employed. Be it with regard to saving Syria or containing Iran, and albeit for very different reasons, both EU and U.S. Middle East policies suffer from the underlying contradiction of a claim to leadership with an arms-length approach. Russia's role in Syria and across the region has raised not only the threshold for military engagement but EU and U.S. stakes in the conflict more broadly.

¹⁰ The White House: Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia, 20 November 2018.

¹¹ EU urges arms ban on Saudi alliance to stop Yemen war, Press TV, 5 October 2018.

¹² Joost Hiltermann: It's Time for the European Union to Push Yemen Towards Peace, International Crisis Group, 8 June 2018.

¹³ Riccardo Alcaro: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Europe's Uncertain Role in Middle Eastern Geopolitics, IAI Policy Brief, May 2018.

European ‘Middle Powers’ and the Middle East in the age of Trump and Brexit

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The two seismic shocks of world politics in 2016— Britain’s narrow vote to leave the European Union and Donald Trump’s bitterly-contested election as 45th President of the United States— have triggered contrasting and somewhat contradicting responses by European ‘middle powers’ toward regional policies in the Middle East. Even as the future of Britain’s relationship with the European Union has been plunged into uncertainty amid rounds of acrimonious negotiations over the precise form ‘Brexit’ will take, British, French, and German leaders have worked more closely together on issues such as the Iran nuclear agreement, the war in Yemen, and the response to the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Policy responses have, to an extent, been conditioned by recognition of a shared commonality in regionwide interests in the face of the unpredictability of the Trump administration’s approach to regional and international affairs. What remains to be seen is whether the ‘E3’ troika of Britain, France, and Germany evolves into a more substantive coordination of regional policies or if the endemic bilateralism in European-Middle East relations continues to predominate in matters of trade, investment, and arms sales.

A strong streak of bilateralism has consistently run through relations between European states and their counterparts in the Middle East and North Africa. Multilateral initiatives such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (the ‘Barcelona process’), the European Neighborhood Policy have struggled to generate political momentum that extends beyond the technocratic and policymaking enclaves of their origin. In the security sphere, a broadly similar fate befell both the Mediterranean Dialogue (launched in 1994) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (2004), attempts by NATO to operationalize closer cooperation with states in North Africa and the Levant and in the Gulf respectively. A persistent point of friction was the fact that political and business leaders continued to prioritize national over European interests, a case in point

being when Angela Merkel visited the Gulf in early-2007, ostensibly representing the EU through the rotating six-month presidency of the European Council held at the time by Germany, but used the visit to make the case for German trade, investment, and energy with Gulf States.¹

After the Brexit vote in June 2016 it appeared initially that the British government intended to focus on securing a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a way of illustrating that Britain remained ‘open for business’ despite the uncertainty surrounding its future status outside the EU. British officials met with their GCC counterparts as early as July 2016 to begin preparatory work on FTA negotiations that would, it was hoped, provide meaning and depth to Theresa May’s vision of a post-Brexit ‘Global Britain.’ Five months later, May was the external guest of honor at the GCC’s annual summit in Bahrain, during which she told her hosts emphatically, “Gulf security is our security. I want to assure you that I am clear-eyed about the threat that Iran poses to the Gulf and to the wider Middle East.” However, the hoped-for quick movement toward a UK-GCC trade deal foundered in 2017 when the boycott of Qatar by three other GCC states (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain) fractured the organization and left it little more than a shell that existed more on paper than in practice.

Although Theresa May hurried to Washington, DC, to become the first foreign leader to visit President Trump after his inauguration in January 2017, any sense of optimism that the responsibilities of office would temper the president’s mercurial instincts dissipated almost immediately with the chaotic (and questionable constitutionality) of the ‘travel ban’ rollout later that same day.² Over the course of the following months, the conflicting, and frequently contradictory, signals emanating from the White House and the broader Trump

administration appeared to draw London, Paris, and Berlin closer together in defense of common interests in specific areas such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, to which Britain, France, and Germany are all signatories. Coordinated E3 action to 'save' the Iran nuclear deal accelerated in October 2017 after President Trump declared his intent to not recertify Iran's compliance with the JCPOA and take steps to withdraw the United States from the agreement. In response, May, Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron issued a joint statement reaffirming their commitment to the JCPOA and its implementation as a matter of 'shared national security interest.'³

The October 2017 joint statement on Iran proved to be the first of many as British, French, and German leaders rallied together to seek, in vain, to prevent President Trump from withdrawing the United States from the Iran deal in May 2018. Further joint statements followed, in April 2018 reiterating their support for the JCPOA ahead of President Trump's decision on whether to pull the US out of the JCPOA,⁴ on May 8, 2018, regretting the US withdrawal within hours of it being announced,⁵ and in November 2018, this time signed by the three countries' foreign and finance ministers and issued in conjunction with Federica Mogherini, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, regretting the US decision to re-impose sanctions in Iran and restating, again, their belief that the JCPOA 'is a key element of the global non-proliferation architecture and multilateral diplomacy.'⁶

In recent months the trilateral cooperation over Iran appears to have broadened to encompass other regional issues and, again, seems to have been triggered by a mutual concern for President Trump's apparent disregard for key aspects of the international rules-based order. Following the murder of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in October 2018, the British, French, and German foreign ministers called for a 'comprehensive, transparent, and credible' process of investigation and accountability and pointedly expressed the need for the relationship with Saudi Arabia to rest on joint commitments under international law.⁷ Also in

October 2018, the E3 joined with other current and former European Union members of the United Nations Security Council to issue an 'E8' joint statement in support of the UN Special Envoy to Syria's efforts to resume the UN-led political process in Geneva and achieve a sustainable solution to end the nearly eight-year long war.⁸

The reference to a common E8 position on Syria reflects the sometimes-overlapping clustering of policymaking authority within the EU that overlies existing tensions between the prioritization of individual states' own conceptions of national interest in maintaining separate bilateral relationships. In addition to the E3 and the E8, an 'E4' grouping (adding Italy to the E3 of France, Germany, and the UK) emerged in early-2018 and conducted three rounds of political consultations on regional issues with Iran in February, May, and September.⁹ Somewhat confusingly, the EU, through its European External Action Service, also held a broadly synchronous series of meetings in 2018 with officials from Iran's Foreign Ministry as part of an EU-Iran High Political Dialogue that focused on a wide array of bilateral and regional issues, including Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Afghanistan.¹⁰

A common challenge for the 'middle powers' in Europe, which they share with others such as Canada, has been one of balancing political, economic, and strategic partnerships in Middle Eastern states with human rights considerations at a time when the Trump administration's cavalier approach to the international system appears to have emboldened leaders in several regional states, notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to become rather more aggressive in their own regional and foreign policy stances. London has, for decades, been a center for Arab opposition figures and exiles and as a result has come under pressure from both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in the 1990s and since 2012 respectively.¹¹ Since 2016, Saudi leadership under the assertive Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has flexed its muscles against Sweden, Germany, and Canada over human rights criticism, while the UAE has launched informal boycotts of business with European states that have suspended arms sales out of concern they would be used in Yemen.¹²

And yet, the extent of coordination among ‘middle powers’ is likely to be limited by practical issues of national consideration that move beyond rhetorical statements of commitment to multilateral agreements and international frameworks and norms. None of the European states that placed partial blocks on arms sales to Saudi Arabia and/or the UAE – Finland, Germany, Norway, Spain, and the Flanders region of Belgium – appear to have done so in coordination with each other.¹³ Neither the UK nor French governments signaled any intent to take similar measures, which would add significant weight to the other European moves as they would come from the second- and third-largest arms exporters to Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, French policy under President Macron has focused on retaining a working relationship with Mohammed bin Salman even after the political fallout from Khashoggi’s murder, suggesting that the above-mentioned joint commitment to seeking a full and impartial investigation is more rhetorical in the French case than it might be for the German and British co-signatories.¹⁴

European states continue therefore to struggle with the balancing act of working together to augment and magnify their geopolitical strength while maintaining their own robust sets of national and regional interests. This has long been a source of ‘comparative advantage’ to partners in the Gulf, which have been known to play European states against each other to maximize political leverage and commercial terms in trade or investment deals; a recent example being in 2012 and 2013, when the British government under David Cameron lobbied intensively to secure a multi-billion-dollar contract for BAE Systems to sell 60 Typhoon fighter jets to the UAE

against perceived French competition for the rival Rafale. Dozens of ministerial visits to the UAE and UK support for Dubai’s bid for the World Expo 2020, trips to Abu Dhabi by Cameron and senior members of the British royal family, a state visit to the UK accorded to UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and a decision to grant Emiratis visa-waiver access to the United Kingdom were all insufficient, however, to win the contract at a time of relative tension in UK-UAE ties over the British government’s perceived (in Abu Dhabi) softness toward the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁵

While the dilemma facing European governments between acting in the national or EU interest may never be resolved, except in the British case post-Brexit, the trend for European states to coordinate policy responses to White House decisions is becoming clearer. As the Trump presidency moves into the second half of its (first) term, the set of core assumptions that have underpinned the transatlantic alliance for seven decades continue to be questioned as never before. While this process has unfolded at a time the EU is itself reeling from a decade of Eurozone crises and Britain’s impending withdrawal, the inclusion of Britain in the joint statements with France and Germany suggests that officials in all three capitals, especially London, are exploring new ways to work together and safeguard common interests, and that the Middle East, in part because of the White House’s unilateral and unpredictable approach to the region, is a test of the European capacity to counter Trump’s actions in the remainder of his presidency.

Endnotes

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EU foreign policy in MENA: The pitfalls of depoliticization

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In the last few years, Europe has struggled to simultaneously cope with internal and external crises. Internally it is coping with the rise of anti-establishment parties, democratic backsliding and Brexit, to name just the most pressing ones. Externally, it has failed to formulate a comprehensive approach dealing with the post-Arab uprisings regional turmoil, including increased migratory flows, terrorist threats and civil and proxy wars from Syria to Yemen.

Three critical dossiers in European foreign policy offer insight into its approach to the MENA region: democratizing Tunisia, political involution in Egypt, and the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The EU has been motivated by transformative goals in Tunisia and Iran, while in the case of Egypt it has defended the status quo. In terms of logics of action, it has depoliticized dossiers in Egypt and Tunisia, while it has politicized the nuclear agreement's dossier, even when the US unilaterally withdrew in May 2018. The strategies of depoliticization have taken different shapes in Egypt and Tunisia: vis-à-vis the former, the EU has restarted political cooperation since 2015 despite an authoritarian reconfiguration, while in Tunisia, despite a democratizing process, Brussels has kept a minimum common denominator of democracy, espousing a procedural understanding.

In the past two decades, the EU has looked at Tunisia and Egypt through the prism of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), a contractual framework in place since 2004 regulating and advancing relations with the EU's eastern and southern neighboring countries. The ENP was initially held as a transformative policy tool for the development and stabilization of neighboring countries, but its technocratic logic has quickly surfaced and imposed itself

in the EU's bilateral relations with the southern Med. When the 2010-2011 uprisings took place, the consensus over the until then predominantly governance-driven approach was shattered and political considerations came to the fore.

In response, the EU reformulated its policy and claimed to be assisting democratic change through political conditionality. Between 2011 and 2015, Brussels endorsed a pro-democracy based policy vis-à-vis countries undergoing political change in its southern neighborhood. In its own critique of its previous approaches,¹ the EU stepped up its ambitions and argued in favor of promoting 'deep democracy,' whereby democratic reforms would be rewarded with greater access to markets or increased mobility to Europe. The EU would stick to an enhanced form of positive conditionality, or 'More for More,' complemented by what the European Parliament termed 'the less for less' approach, where democratic backsliding would be met by less access to European markets and openings. While the former has taken place in Tunisia, albeit within a neoliberal procedural understanding of democracy, negative conditionality has never been applied, not even in post-2013 authoritarian Egypt.

This approach ceased as Egypt and other Arab states opted for new authoritarian configuration and issues such as migration rose to the fore across European capitals. So did the kind of 'deep democracy' the EU aimed to promote. This half-hearted support to Arab democracy was partially also a consequence of a conceptually vague European understanding of democracy, where elements of social, political and procedural democracy are intertwined, without identifying the conditions under which one should be promoted rather than another. This conceptual vagueness² has had one crucial policy implication in the

¹ European Commission, "Partnership for Democracy and shared prosperity", March 2011.

² Milja Kurki, "Political Economy Perspective: Fuzzy Liberalism and EU Democracy Promotion: Why Concepts Matter," *The Substance of EU Democracy Promotion*, 35-37.

post-2011 southern neighborhood: a depoliticized view of democracy³ even in those rare contexts where endogenous social forces were and are pushing for change, such as Tunisia. Instead of “deep democracy,” the EU has pushed for different citizenship rights, mostly civil (as in the case of the ENP and European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, EIDHR) or political (as is the case with the European Endowment for Democracy, EED), working partially in a complementary, partially in a contradictory way.⁴

Among all these different tools, only the EED endorsed an emancipatory view of democracy which understands citizenship as ‘a field of struggle between freedom and obedience,’ where citizens are ‘both subjects of power-requiring disobedience- and subjects to power -requiring obedience.’⁵ The EED was how the EU talked the talk of change and transformation after the Uprisings, employing the notion of ‘deep democracy’ to be promoted and supported abroad. The other tools, be it the ENP or the EIDHR, adhere to more mainstream procedural understandings of citizenship and democracy.

If, overall, the EU abode by a protective,⁶ static understanding of democracy, where rights are defined once and for all and electoral participation is the only benchmark to measure democratic success,⁷ by so doing it lost the opportunity to side with local social forces demanding for much deeper changes in structural power relations, both political and economic. This would have required a developmentalist, dynamic view where rights can and should be expanded, fought for, in a never-ending process of changing state-society relations.⁸

This played out differently across different cases. In Tunisia, Brussels espoused a transformative agenda aimed at creating an inclusive and democratic political system, as far away as possible from the Ben Ali’s regime. Brussels, however, despite these normative goals, has remained within the remit of procedural, Schumpeterian depoliticized democracy, mostly centered around free and fair elections, with only residual references to forms of political participation beyond the electoral moment.

This was coupled with the adoption of the same neoliberal economic assistance policies it used to adopt before 2010. While intended to create an inclusive and sustainable growth, their neoliberal orientation and top-down nature has depoliticized the overall EU transformative effort. Social justice and redistribution have therefore remained on paper as ultimate goals to be attained, without actively promoting them. .

In the case of Egypt, the EU initially timidly embraced change, politically represented by the electoral victory of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), refraining however from halting cooperation and assistance once -following massive popular demonstrations demanding change- the military successfully staged a military coup in July 2013. The EU response to the increasing authoritarian backsliding there has been negligible, beside asking for a fair process for the jailed MB leader, Mohammed Morsi.

After initial emancipatory conceptions such as the ‘deep democracy’ one, then, since 2014 and the authoritarian backlash in Egypt, the closure of political space in Morocco and worsening prospects in Libya and Syria,

³ Milja Kurki, “How the EU Can Adopt a New Type of Democracy Support” (FRIDE Brief, 112, March 2012).

⁴ Ruth Hanau Santini, 2018 “The EU and its southern neighbors: a fuzzy model of citizenship promotion?” in: Butenschon, Nils A. and Roel Meijer (Eds.), *The Middle East in transition. The centrality of citizenship*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 251-272.

⁵ Étienne Balibar, “Citizen Subject,” in *Who Comes After the Subject*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (London: Routledge, 1991), 46.

⁶ David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁷ Devin K. Joshi, “The Protective and Developmental Varieties of Liberal Democracy: A Difference in Kind or Degree?” *Democratization* 20 (2013) 2: 187-214.

⁸ Étienne Balibar, *Citizenship* (Translated by Thomas Scott-Railton. Oxford: Polity Press, 2015).

more cautious formulations and static conceptions came to the fore in European thinking, which immediately reverberated in the EU's relations with Egypt. Between March and November 2015, the European Commission underwent a review of its Neighborhood Policy, centered around the imperative of 'stabilization.' Democracy had, by then, disappeared from the list of the axes guiding European foreign policy in the region (trade, connectivity, migration and governance).⁹

The EU never employed the full list of deep democracy indicators adopted in 2011 as benchmarks in assessing democratic progress from one year to the next within the ENP. The mid-term review referred to the principles of differentiation and ownership rather than deep democracy.¹⁰ This facilitated the maintenance of political relations within the ENP with Egypt: the EU-Egypt Association Council resumed its meetings in 2015 and met eight times until 2018. Even the limited leverage Brussels could have counted on vis-à-vis un-democratizing or increasingly illiberal or authoritarian political regime was lost for lack of political will to implement and follow through with previous foreign policy decisions. So, if the main areas of cooperation between 2007-2013 had been political reform and good governance, economic competitiveness, in 2014-2016 the focus was on assisting the socioeconomic sector and the EU decreased its support in all issues related to political reform.

Since the 2013 coup, the EU simply omitted the democracy assistance policies from its bilateral relations with Egypt. Had the EU wanted to try to bypass the post-2014 Sisi government and support civil rights, it could have tried to more forcefully use the European Instrument for

Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which could have strengthened the civil and human rights' side of democracy in a developmental way. The EIDHR enables the Union to bypass local governments and directly channel democracy support to selected associations (not, however, unions, religious-based groups, individuals. To reflect on the limited use of this instrument by Europe, suffice it to consider that between 2014-2017, Egypt benefitted from only 4 million euros through this funding program, the only one which can directly engage with local CSOs,¹¹ while only in 2016 profiting from an assistance from the ENP equaling over 139 million euros.¹²

The realpolitik trend was further discursively legitimized in June 2016 with the adoption of the European Global Strategy (EUGS), the new EU security strategy, premised on the so-called 'principled pragmatism.' According to the Strategy, the EU should: strengthen security and defence; invest in the resilience of states and societies to our East and South; develop an integrated approach to conflicts and crises; promote and support cooperative regional orders; and reinforce a global governance.¹³ The pragmatist turn in interventionism was coupled with the local turn, emphasizing resilience -societal capacity to face change, be it endogenous or exogenous-. The oxymoronic expression of 'principled pragmatism' could be easily led as a call for supporting democracy on a case-by-case basis,¹⁴ rather than as a defining EU guiding principle in its relations with the southern neighborhood. The EU had come full circle and all its pro-deep democracy discourse adopted in the wake of the Arab uprisings was dismissed once and for all.

Basically, the EU left its political ambitions to promote democracy in an emancipatory way in the neighborhood to

⁹ European Commission, "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions." Review of the European Neighborhood Policy, 18 November 2015, 3.

¹⁰ European Commission 2015 (ibid).

¹¹ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/egypt_it

¹² European Commission, 2017. Annual Report on the implementation of the European Union's Instruments for financing external action in 2016.

¹³ Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, June 2016, p. 25-26. Accessed at: https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/regions/files/eugs_review_web.pdf

¹⁴ Ana Juncos, 2016. "Resilience as the new EU foreign policy paradigm: a pragmatist turn?"; *European Security*.

a residual tool, the European Endowment for Democracy, a tool created in 2013 as an independent trust fund. The EED's core goals are to "build citizens' capacities and strengthen independent voices, support initiatives that build foundations for more inclusive and participatory democracies and work to counter corruption."¹⁵ It is a small program, symbolic in terms of outreach but highly flexible, which can directly channel funds to foreign political parties, social movements, democracy activists. In a residual and complementary fashion, therefore, Brussels instrumentally supports political democracy in the southern and eastern neighborhood, albeit with such limited sums and small individual projects impossible to replicate in a systematic way that their impact is intended to remain largely symbolic.

However, while 2015 marked the return of *realpolitik* Europe in North Africa, vis-à-vis Iran, Europe stood by its transformative goal of ending the nuclear crisis with Iran and contribute to normalize relations with the country by remaining the staunchest supporter of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The agreement was signed in July 2015 after a decade-long international diplomatic efforts initially spearheaded by the E3 (France, the UK and Germany), then joined by the EU, and lastly becoming the E3/EU+3 or P5+1 (France, United Kingdom, US, Russia, China plus Germany). After the election of Donald Trump in November 2016, the US unilaterally withdrew from the agreement in May 2018, with a view to re-impose sanctions against Iran.

The EU pledged Iran it would try to compensate by increasing economic exchanges with Tehran, preserve the country's ability to export oil and maintain banking transactions. While operationally it has so far struggled to devise effective ways to keep banking transactions afloat, it has been working on a 'special purpose vehicle' intended to bypass US sanctions, called INSTEX, based

in France and operating with EU financial guarantees.¹⁶ To address concerns outside the JCPOA, the EU entered into 'structured dialogue' with Iran in January 2018 and has been actively trying to promote a constructive solution not just to the Iran's nuclear program issue but also to the country's regional role.¹⁷ Without refraining from playing a prominent role on the international diplomatic stage, Brussels and European capitals have politicized the Iran's issue and have dared taking a different stance from the US, in 2003 when they initiated dialogue with Tehran, and after the US unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018. The Iranian dossier shows the capacity Europe has to mobilize for an international foreign policy crisis, stand by its stance, keep a united front and not backing down. While leading to the JCPOA was considered one of the greatest EU foreign policy successes in the past two decades, the prospects now for bringing the two sides back to the table look grim. This, however, should not lead astray from the commitment and the difference Europe can make on the global stage when it consistently acts as a norm entrepreneur.

Europe therefore initially welcomed post-2011 political change, as showed by its foreign policy discursive and policy change in 2011. However, the EU's normative stance lasted only a couple of years and its transformative goals vis-à-vis the transitioning countries have subsided and have been incrementally replaced by pro-status quo concerns, as epitomized by its new foreign policy orientations adopted in 2015-2016 vis-à-vis Egypt, most notably, but also Tunisia, where it only accompanied domestic change, without serving as a political democracy supporter. Together with the change of heart, its role has progressively become that of a depoliticizing actor, taking political issues off the agenda or dealing with both Tunisia and Egypt in a procedural way. While Brussels has openly advocated for more inclusive societies and polities in its southern neighborhood, this vision has been supported

¹⁵ European Endowment for Democracy, Annual Report 2016, 5. Accessed at: <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/annual-report-2016/>

¹⁶ "INSTEX: Europe Sets Up Transactions Channel with Iran", in *Deutsche Welle*, 31 January 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3CToy>.

¹⁷ Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi et al, "Better together: Brexit, the E3, and the future of Europe's approach towards Iran", RUSI, 18th April 2018. Available at: <https://rusi.org/publication/other-publications/better-together-brexit-e3-and-future-europe-s-approach-towards-iran>

with the smallest diplomatic instruments and limited economic resources, while the bulk of the EU's action has failed to shift from a promotion of different kinds of protective democracy to developmental ones. The liberal democracy exported by the EU in its near abroad has continued to focus on elections, procedural democracy, rule of law, civil society, restraining the more egalitarian and participatory aspects of democracy, and sacrificing the empowerment of both political and socio-economic rights, on the altar of minimum advances in its human rights and procedural democracy agenda.

The EU in MENA has been a consistent transformative actor when it comes to Iran, considered a key foreign

policy issue not just in Europe's neighborhood but for international politics, where Europe has stood by its initial hunch in devising a diplomatic solution and re-integrating Iran in the regional and international political environment, even when left alone by the US Trumpian u-turn, creatively trying to devise diplomatic and economic tools to keep Iran in the nuclear agreement and not restart the enrichment program or cut diplomatic ties with the international community. Europe has demonstrated it can politicize issues and stand by them for a long period of time when facing international crises, while when issues are closer to home but their salience is harder to ascertain in security terms, the EU manages challenges and muddles through in a depoliticized way.

The UN and the Arab Uprisings: Reflecting a Confused International Order

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The role of the United Nations during the Arab uprisings shifted swiftly from a triumphalist posture rooted in its self-understanding of its role in the larger global liberal project, to a more confused role as international consensus broke down amid state collapse in venues such as Libya, Yemen and Syria. These dramatic shifts offer insights into how we might productively think about the UN during this period as a site of order maintenance and legitimacy struggles.

Shortly after the start of the Arab uprisings, the United Nations Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs, B. Lynn Pascoe, declared that the “old Middle East is dead” and, “without interfering,” the UN had to “support these historic transformations which have come so suddenly and represent such a fundamental break from the past.” The UN Secretary General had decided from the very outset, Pascoe noted, to “be on the side of the people and on the side of modernization.”¹

Accordingly, during these early days, the UN dispatched high-ranking diplomats to mediate the conflicts in Libya and Yemen; and provided technical assistance in the Tunisian and Egyptian-lead elections processes. Even the explicit use of the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) principle in the Security Council resolution justifying military intervention in Libya—for the protection of civilians—was unanimously passed, and promptly celebrated in UN circles as the dawn of a new era in which violent state clampdowns on their own citizens would no longer be tolerated; and international norms would prevail.

These sorts of interventions, popular locally and supported by consensus among the key UN Member States, were very much in line with the UN’s wider peacebuilding mandate in the post-Cold War paradigm of the liberal peace. The sacrosanct Cold War notion of state sovereignty—which both the Soviet bloc and the post-colonial Global South insisted upon as the bedrock of international politics as a means to limit Western intervention—had, in the post-Cold War period, become more overtly fluid. With Western support, the UN, in its own self-perception, became an indispensable actor in legitimizing and ‘correcting’ the path of illiberal states, now deemed “weak” or “failed.” It did so through peace and state-building exercises such as amending constitutions, arranging and monitoring elections, reforming the security sector, liberalizing the economy, and promoting civil society. As Toby Dodge has argued, this post-Cold War approach to peacebuilding was given “ideational and instrumental coherence” by linking the main drivers of increased humanitarian suffering and conflict to the “sins” of the state itself.²

Before long, the Arab uprisings thrust the UN into increasingly uncomfortable positions and spotlight as the violent counter-attack began in the region.³ Its role in the global liberal peace project depended on international consensus, and this was quickly dissipating—as it had during the 2003 US war on Iraq—as regional actors competed in filling the void and directing this regional transformation. In particular, Libya, Yemen and Syria witnessed humanitarian tragedies, unprecedented displacement crises, and high-profile diplomatic failures. In

¹ United Nations Peacekeeping (2011), “The Arab Awakening and the UN Political response: An Interview with B. Lynn Pascoe” in *United Nations Peace Operations Review 2011*, p.12.

² Toby Dodge (2013), ‘Intervention and Dreams of Exogenous State-building: The Application of Liberal Peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Iraq,’ *Review of International Studies* (2013), 39, p. 1195.

³ Karim Makdisi (2017), “Intervention and the Arab Uprisings: From Transformation to Maintenance of Regional Order,” in eds. Rasmus Boserup et al, *New Conflict Dynamics: Between Regional Autonomy and Intervention in the Middle East and North Africa*, Danish Institute for International Studies, pp. 93-107.

each of these venues, the UN was increasingly disparaged, at best, or accused of complicity. In Libya, for example, Jeff Bachman represented many anti-NATO interventionists by holding the UN responsible for legitimizing NATO's likely "crime of aggression" and violations of international humanitarian law through its regime change agenda that, he argues, caused more harm to Libyan civilians than good.⁴ Similar accusations were made against the UN Security Council's apparent legitimization of the disastrous Saudi-led coalition war in Yemen.

Syria was the most trying arena. Criticism of UN complicity went well beyond the Security Council. Reinoud Leenders blasted the UN's "systemic" failure and the "moral bankruptcy" of its aid programs that, since 2012 he argued, had effectively legitimized the Syrian regime.⁵ Zaher Sahloul, president of the Syrian American Medical Society, went further, telling *Al-Jazeera* that "The UN is [the] main culprit and they are as responsible as [Syrian President] Bashar al-Assad's regime."⁶ Similar accusations were leveled by a former UN High Commission for Refugees staff member against UN directors with "well-nourished careers" who "put out cutesy heart-warming videos" rather than taking a firmer stand on the unprecedented Syrian refugee crisis. He accused the then-chief (and now Secretary General) Antonio Guterres of being weak, and cowing to states that told him to "suck your thumb" while they negotiate a diplomatic solution.⁷ This view was not uncommon among supporters of the Syrian rebellion.

The harsh criticism of the UN's response in the Syrian war, and its failures in Libya and Yemen (not to mention its silence in places such as Bahrain), are certainly valid.

But the UN has all too often been used a convenient punching bag, one masking the moral and political failures by key regional and international players.⁸ Clearly, at its most basic level, the UN is a reflection of great power politics. As an international relations theory, realism is thus indispensable in placing power at the center of any analysis. A Russian-US agreement in 2013 enabled the UN to disarm Syria's chemical weapons, and NATO to intervene in Libya in 2011 ostensibly to protect civilians. The veto power at the Security Council, on the other hand, explains why Russia could repeatedly block meaningful action in Syria, while the US could do the same in Yemen and Palestine.

It is insufficient, however, to understand the UN solely on a case by case basis as a static reflection of inter-state power. This realist account tells only a limited story of its role during the Arab uprisings. As such, besides despairing at how little the UN is doing, or can do when consensus breaks down—and avoiding superficial, banal analyses that cast "the UN" as a unitary actor that is good or bad—how can we more productively think about its position in the Arab uprisings period? Borrowing from concepts developed by Robert Cox and Richard Falk respectively, I suggest that thinking in historical dialectical and legitimacy struggles are particularly useful.

For Cox, the historical dialectic allows us to move beyond realism to explore the social processes that "create and transform forms of state and the state system itself" and the "alterations in perceptions and meanings that constitute and reconstitute the objective world order."⁹ This more malleable reading of history, according to Cox, is bound up with competing notions of order *maintenance*

⁴ Jeff Bachman (2017), "Libya: a UN Resolution and NATO failure to protect," in Makdisi and Prashad (eds.), *Land of Blue Helmets: The United Nations in the Arab World*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, p.226.

⁵ Reinoud Leenders (2016), "UN \$4 billion aid in Syria is morally bankrupt," *The Guardian* (29 August, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2016/aug/29/uns-4bn-aid-effort-in-syria-is-morally-bankrupt>.

⁶ Al-Jazeera (2016), "Syria's war: Aid agencies suspend cooperation with UN," (9 September, 2016), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/syria-war-aid-agencies-suspend-cooperation-160908164810695.html>.

⁷ Tom Miles, "As refugee crisis grows, UN agency faces questions," Reuters (16 September, 2015), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-unhcr-insight/as-refugee-crisis-grows-u-n-agency-faces-questions-idUSKCN0RG13E20150916>.

⁸ Makdisi, Karim and Vijay Prashad (2017), *Land of Blue Helmets: The United Nations in the Arab World*, Los Angeles, University of California Press.

⁹ Robert Cox (1992), "Multilateralism and World Order," *Review of International Studies*, Volume 18, p.177.

(“the institutionalization and regulation of established order”) and *transformation* (“the locus of interactions for the transformation of existing order”).¹⁰ In this respect, we need to situate the UN within the broader context of an evolving, contested world (and regional) order and changing form of multilateralism. Briefly, it seems clear that the US has failed in its attempts to re-shape the Middle East regional order first during the post-2003 period, and then again during the Arab uprisings period.¹¹ I posit that the former sparked the challenge of (state) order transformation by non-state players in the region; while the latter enabled Russia to regain its international stature in an attempt to end this challenge.

During such transformation, it is helpful to read the UN as a key actor of (inter-state) order maintenance. One of its most important mechanisms in this regard is simply retaining the space needed to negotiate international politics. As Bali and Rana have asserted, in contrast to military intervention by NATO states or Russia, only UN involvement retains the ability to make space for local and external parties to negotiate a political settlement.¹² Notwithstanding criticism of its Syria operations, Arafat Jamal has similarly argued that in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war, the UNHCR created space for international humanitarianism to take root in the region for the first time.¹³

For his part, Richard Falk sees the UN not as automatically conveying legitimacy but rather as a site of a legitimacy struggle. He uses a critical constructivist approach to legitimacy that balances two understandings: the first is a “hegemonic legitimacy” that coincides with great power action in a multilateral context; and the second is

related to the “politics of resistance” which the militarily weaker side utilizes to persevere in its struggle despite the odds.¹⁴ For Palestinians, the refugee agency UNRWA has long served as a site that embodies their right of return. As such, in the face of relentless US attacks during the Trump presidency, UNRWA’s very survival against the odds has preserved the collective resistance against US attempts to impose a new form of hegemonic legitimacy that negates Palestine refugee rights. In Syria, the Syrian state has over the past several years placed great emphasis on retaining its international legitimacy (with Russian backing) within UN fora. By accepting the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and acceding to the Chemical Weapons Convention in 2013, for instance, it forced the international community’s de facto legitimizing its institutions and authority during and after the chemical weapons disarmament process.

Overall, the uncertain and ambivalent role of the UN during the Arab uprisings reflects a world order in transition. It is caught between maintaining an old order that it is familiar with—mediating, working with sovereign states to find political solutions, creating space for humanitarians to work, and assisting the liberalizing process—and an emerging order in which the US moment is in decline, a more “multiplex” order is emerging, and non-state players increasingly challenge the notion of sovereignty. During such turbulence, the default of the UN machinery is to work towards maintaining order and stability rather than to promote genuine transformation. Such a view makes it easier to understand—if not accept—why Lynn Pascoe’s remarks about the UN siding with the “people” during the uprisings was merely aspirational.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.163.

¹¹ Waleed Hazbun (2017), “Beyond the American Era in the Middle East: An Evolving Landscape of Turbulence,” in *New Conflict Dynamics*, op.cit, pp. 31-42.

¹² Bali, Asla and Aziz Rana (2017), “The Wrong Kind of Intervention in Syria,” in *Land of Blue Helmets*, op.cit., pp. 115-140.

¹³ Arafat Jamal (2017), “The UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Iraq Refugee Operation: Resettling Refugees, Shifting the Middle East Humanitarian Landscape,” in *Land of Blue Helmets*, op.cit., pp.335-358.

¹⁴ Falk, Richard (2005), “Legality and Legitimacy: The Quest for Principled Flexibility and Restraint,” *Review of International Studies*: 31, pp. 33-50.

Insecurity, Identity Politics, and the Restructuring of the Middle East

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Identity politics are not a new phenomenon in the Middle East; they have witnessed several ebbs and flows (Telhami and Barnett 2002). The current era is characterized by a distinctive level and intensity of identity politics, however, which must be seen as an integral part of the emergent structure of regional politics. This essay advances three main claims about the current “flow” of identity politics in the region. First, the rise of ethno-religious politics cannot be explained in terms of the specificities of Arab politics because the trend is not limited to Muslim majority countries. Israel offers a prominent but generally overlooked example. Second, the sharpening of ethno-religious difference is the result of strategic action under specific enabling conditions. The sense of insecurity and fear in periods of transition is a crucial enabling condition. Ironically, however, a heightened sense of insecurity not only acts as an enabling condition but is also the *outcome* of the politics of fear adopted by political leaders in the region. Third, the rise of identity politics is a trend on a broader scale, as seen in the United States and Europe. The memo concludes by reflecting on the role of local actors and developments as well as on the implications of the growing power of ethno-religious politics in the Middle East—and beyond.¹

Beyond Muslim sectarianism: Identity politics in Israel

Discussion of Identity politics in the current Middle East often focuses exclusively on sectarianism or on the role of political Islam (e.g. POMEPS 2013). But what type of identity politics are we referring to? By invoking universalist values and ideas, identity politics may be inclusive. But if politics are framed on the basis of belonging to allegedly primordial ethnic or religious groups, as is the case in the Middle East at present, an exclusionary and antagonistic

type of identity politics is at work. In parallel, we have been witnessing the securitization of religious and ethnic identities in the region, that is, the invoking or construction of communities *as being under threat* (Malmvig 2015: 32; 2014). These collective identities, which are or have become real, are moved to the realm of “panic politics” (Buzan et al. 1998: 34), thereby legitimizing exceptional means. Sectarian identities have turned into sources of conflict (Darwich and Fakhoury 2017), fomenting fragmentation within and among states. Current identity politics in the region thus differ from those in the past, most notably pan-Arabism with its unifying rhetoric at the *supranational* level (no matter the divisions it caused among states in practice) (Kerr 1971; Valbjørn and Bank 2012).

While it is fashionable to invoke the age-old Sunni-Shi’a divide as *the* explanation for the current violence in the region, ethno-religious politics have also been on the rise in Israel.

Ethno-religious conceptions of state- and nationhood were built into the Israeli state from the outset, as Zionism’s objective of creating a “state of the Jews” indicates. In recent decades, identity politics in Israel have clearly been on the rise (Del Sarto 2017a). This development is reflected in the ever-growing power of the neo-revisionist Israeli Right, which in turn manifests in important changes in both domestic Israeli politics and in its foreign policy.

The recent adoption of the “Jewish nation-state law,” which anchors the definition of Israel as the Jewish nation-state in the country’s basic laws (Israel’s version of a constitution), is perhaps the most obvious case in point. The law reserves the right to self-determination to the Jewish collective only, relegating the Palestinian-Arab minority which constitutes

¹ The author would like to thank Maria-Louise Clausen, May Darwich, Waleed Hazbun, Amaney Jamal, Kristina Kausch, Mark Lynch, Karim Makdissi and Morten Valbjørn for great comments on a previous draft of this memo.

about 20% of Israeli citizens to a secondary status outside the collective. Numerous opinion polls confirm the strong domestic support for ethno-religious conceptions of state and nationhood. For example, a growing number of Jewish Israelis think that a “Jewish state” is more important than a democratic one (Hermann et al. 2014). In 2016, 52% of Jewish Israelis believed that Israeli citizens who are unwilling to declare that Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people should be stripped off their voting rights. A staggering 59% of Jewish Israeli respondents oppose the participation of Arab parties in governments (Hermann et al. 2016). According to another poll, 48% of Jewish Israeli respondents regarded the Palestinians’ recognition of Israel as the state of the Jewish people as more important than reaching a peace agreement with them (Israel Democracy Institute 2016).

Dominant perceptions of existential threats emanating from the outside world shape this emergent power of ethno-religious ideas in Israel. The prevailing view is that the country is facing existential threats, with the ultimate objective of its enemies being the destruction of the “Jewish state.” While these notions are not new (Maoz 2009), the securitization of Jewish identity increased after the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000. With terrorism becoming a major concern, Israeli political leaders claimed that “there is no partner for peace” on the Palestinian side. They also referred to the inherently evil nature of Iran and its proxies, including Hizballah and Hamas, while warning of a possible “second Holocaust” (Klein Halevi and Oren 2007). These ideas convey a strong sense of besiegement and tend to define the regional reality as a struggle between the Arab/Muslim world (or large parts of it) and the Jewish people.

The domestic support for these positions, and the policies they prescribe, has been striking. For example, a vast majority of Jewish Israelis came to believe that the Palestinians are not interested in peace (Halperin and Bar-Tal 2007; Israel Democracy Institute 2018). Between 80% and 94% of Jewish Israelis supported Israel’s three wars on the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip (Ben Meir 2009; Israel Democracy Institute 2014) – an extremely high percentage

considering the high number of Palestinian fatalities. A vast majority of Jewish Israelis is, and remains, afraid of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons (Israel Democracy Institute 2017). Accordingly, the domestic support for Netanyahu’s preferred option of bombing Iranian nuclear sites was large (Center for Iranian Studies 2009)—and probably still is.

Of course there is a material basis to at least some of these threat perceptions: terrorist attacks and saber-rattling neighbors are real. However, while fears can be manipulated, they contradict the notable improvement of Israel’s security environment post-Arab uprisings: Israel is certainly concerned with the presence of Hizballah and Iranian forces in neighboring Syrian territory, but Assad’s Syria is no longer a threat and Hizballah is bogged down in Syria for now. Furthermore, Egypt’s al-Sisi shares Israel’s hostility towards Hamas and Israel’s ties to Saudi Arabia and a number of smaller Gulf monarchies have improved, based on their common dislike of Iran. And Israel’s hawkish policies have the full support of US President Trump.

Strategic action and the politics of fear

These developments in Israeli identity politics can be explained in terms of the same theories which account for the rise of sectarianism and other identities in the rest of the Middle East. Political elites may construct ethno-religious antagonism in order to acquire or maintain power (Fearon and Laitin 2000). Corroborating that group leadership (and thus agency) is crucial, the literature also stresses that specific socio-economic and political circumstances enable “successful” identity politics. In this context, studies highlight the important role played by collective threats in breeding ethnocentric and authoritarian attitudes and behavior (e.g. Fritzsche et al. 2011). The important point is that insecurity and fear—whether genuine or generated—are not only *key enabling conditions* that breed the rise of ethnocentric politics (Fritzsche et al. 2011). They are also the *outcome* of strategic action, namely the politics of insecurity and the securitization of collective identities in which political leaders engage. In other words, leaders in the Middle East

may feel threatened and insecure, but they also have every reason to cultivate a deep sense of insecurity: it increases the legitimacy and domestic support of the exceptional politics they adopt, for the sake of “security.” Hence, the “politics of fear” often trigger a peculiar vicious circle.

In the case of Israel, the central role of Jewish history in the construction of Israeli identity acts as a predisposition for the current rise of ethno-religious politics. In other words, a deep sense of insecurity was built into the Jewish-Israeli collective experience from the outset, which the ongoing conflict with the neighbors only reinforced (Zerubavel 1995; Kimmerling 2001). The growing power of ethno-religious conceptions can also be linked to demographic shifts that have widened the basis of right-wing voting behavior over the decades.² More recently, the violence of the second Intifada and the collapse of Oslo were crucial: They contributed to a general sense of insecurity and fear, prompting most Israeli voters to cast their ballot for the political Right (Berrebi and Klor 2008).

Agency matters, too. Then-Prime Minister Barak deserves the credit for coining the “no Palestinian partner for peace” slogan after the failed Camp David summit in 2000 (Halperin and Bar-Tal 2007). In addition, the Israeli army and the media promoted one-sided representations of reality (Dor 2004). But perhaps most importantly, amid rising sentiments of insecurity during the Intifada, Israel’s right-wing governments have promoted identity-based conceptions of threats. They have highlighted the danger of terrorism targeting the Israeli Jewish collective, repeated the claim that there was no one to talk to on the Palestinian side, and insisted that Iran was an *existential* threat (see Del Sarto 2017a for details). Israeli governments have thus engaged in the politics of insecurity and fear. As the conflict with the Palestinians became redefined as an exclusively ethnic struggle (Klein 2010), political debates have been replaced by a general acceptance of a hardline approach to security.

A look at the broader Middle East confirms that the interaction between structural change and agency is a crucial factor in the rise of ethno-religious politics in periods of uncertainty. For example, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the struggle against Western colonialism created an “identity vacuum” which “fuelled the rise of Arab nationalism” (Hinnebusch 2013: 150). Arab leaders were quick in using Pan-Arabism in their quest for regional hegemony (Kerr 1971). Similarly, the rise of political Islam from the 1970s onwards occurred in a period of profound uncertainty, caused by the 1967 defeat of Arab armies against Israel (Al-Azm 2012) and the decline of Pan-Arabism. Similarly, the rise of Shi’a identity from the mid-1970s onwards took place in a period of uncertainty, with a new generation of politicized Shi’a religious leaders – and the new regime in Iran after the 1979 revolution – exploiting identity for political ends.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 triggered an unprecedented wave of ethno-religious polarization from the mid-2000s onwards. With Iran becoming more assertive after the defeat of archenemy Saddam Hussein, the US intervention prompted a growing antagonism between Sunnis and Shi’a. The sectarian politics of then Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Maliki’s would only deteriorate the situation. This case once more exemplifies the significant role of self-interested actors in accentuating and exploiting ethno-religious difference in situations of pronounced instability. Finally, in the extremely volatile period post-Arab uprisings, with Arab regimes being concerned with their survival (Ryan 2015), regional powers have been accentuating sectarian differences in their quest for regional hegemony (Valbjørn and Bank 2010; Lynch 2016).

Beyond the Middle East

Exclusionary identity politics do not seem to be a Middle Eastern prerogative. In the US and Europe, right-wing populist movements are gaining support, with tribalism, victimhood and xenophobia being on the rise (e.g.

² These include the shift toward a majority of Mizrahi Jewish voters since the 1970s, the steady growth of Israel’s Jewish religious population (higher birth rates) and the immigration from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s.

Fukuyama 2018). But in the absence of comparable levels of conflict, what explains the rise of identity politics in “the West”? While I do not have a definite answer, and with every case having its specificities, two suggestions can be made. But we should first recall that security, or the lack thereof, is a subjective sentiment. While there is clearly a difference between living in a Syrian war zone, or, say, in Switzerland, *threats or perceived threats*—to survival, security, or economic status—seem to be equally significant.

Against the background of globalization and the spread of neoliberalism, the 2008 financial crisis bred a lasting sense of insecurity in many Western societies. It entailed cuts to real wages, rising inequality and poverty, a shrinking welfare state, and the erosion of the economic status of the middle class. In many states, politicians—of all stripes—have not addressed these issues, leaving the playing field to populist forces. The appeal of identity politics may thus be a consequence of this development. Yet ironically, identity politics also contribute to the spread of unchecked neo-liberal economics and their inherent inequality (Fraser 2017; Richardt 2018): while diverting the attention from crucial political questions, they atomize societies into different “tribes” that could otherwise join forces to address pressing economic and political issues. Economic insecurity is also widespread in the Middle East. In many Arab states, the expansion of neo-liberalism forged the emergence of a class of *nouveau riches* linked to political power (Guazzone and Pioppi 2012), along with rising inequality. And Israel and Turkey are among the eight OECD countries with the highest income inequality (OECD 2018).

Secondly, the role of social media seems to be relevant. Acting as so-called echo-chambers among like-minded users, social media have been accused of spreading racism, misogyny and tribalism.³ People also seem to react stronger to negative messages, with posts that trigger fear having the highest media shares. Right-wing

populist forces in the US and in Europe, and their foreign supporters, have aptly manipulated and exploited popular feelings of insecurity, anger, and fear, as evidenced by Russian internet trolls and fake social media accounts during the last US electoral campaign. Social media may thus provide a fertile ground for ethno-religious politics in Western and Middle Eastern societies alike.

Conclusions

A pronounced sense of insecurity in periods of transition is both an enabling condition for the “successful” manipulation and securitization of ethno-religious identities *and* the outcome of the politics of fear adopted by aspiring or incumbent leaders. The resulting vicious circle of exclusionary identity politics points to the mutually constitutive nature of structure and agency. Political leaders thus engage in antagonistic identity politics out of fear and/or to legitimize their rule, but their policies—often bolstered by assertive foreign policies—only increase the sense of insecurity while potentially destabilizing the region further. Moreover, ethno-religious politics prevent the emergence or consolidation of liberal polities that could engage in regional cooperation (Solingen 2007). The conflict potential of the region is thus likely to remain high.

Second, traditional boundaries of state sovereignty are increasingly blurred, as state and non-state actors become connected through powerful identity dynamics (Philipps and Valbjørn 2018). Perhaps ironically, *transnational* identity alliances may actually undermine the authority of those national leaders. This is significant as many regimes in the region lack domestic legitimacy, which has only worsened post-Arab uprisings (Hudson 2015; Del Sarto 2017b). The securitization of identities also legitimizes the meddling of external actors in the domestic affairs of Middle Eastern states, again to the detriment of national political leaders.

³ See Microsoft’s 2016 launching of an AI chat-bot named Tay, which was meant to learn from its interaction on social media. It quickly learned to tweet racist and misogynist comments, to the point that Microsoft decided to end the experiment after only 16 hours (Hayasaki 2016).

Third, external interventions (most notably the US invasion of Iraq and its long-term consequences) and global power shifts contribute to the region's volatility, as does the persistence of violence post-Arab uprisings. However, an exclusive top-down approach to regional developments is insufficient. While global, regional, and domestic dynamics interlock and condition each other (Clausen, Darwich, Hazbun, Ulrichsen), our case points to the crucial role of local actors. The significance of endogenous Middle Eastern actors and factors thus validates the argument made by Snyder (1993) on the domestic source of regional conflict.

Finally, while each case has its specificities, in this case a comparative perspective to the study of Israel and the broader Middle East (Barnett 1996) is extremely useful—in spite of its unpopularity. Furthermore, the rise of identity politics and the decline of liberalism in “the West” (Zielonka 2018) seem to embed the Middle East in peculiar political dynamics that transcend the region. The phenomenon of identity politics thus defies the notion of Middle Eastern exceptionalism, together with a narcissistic “region-centric perspective” (Valbjørn). To conclude, the question of how to put the genie of antagonistic identity politics back into the bottle is of fundamental importance for the future of the Middle East—and far beyond.

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Global and regional crises, empowered Gulf rivals, and the evolving paradigm of regional security

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Arab Gulf monarchs' foreign and defense policies used to be mainly driven by the utter need to ensure their regime's and state's security in a hostile environment with virtually no indigenous capabilities to defend their territorial integrity— a situation which was particularly illustrated during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. They thus adopted neutral strategies on the regional stage, and their military acquisitions mostly constituted a cash flow towards the defense industrial base of Western countries, particularly the US, in exchange for protection guarantees.¹ Their strategies had little to do with gaining more power on the international stage, merely relative autonomy if and when they felt they could achieve it without upsetting the overall checks and balances characterizing the traditional paradigm of Gulf security. However, this has been drastically changing in the past decade. Bolstered by shifts at the international and regional levels, Arab Gulf States, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), have moved onto assertive and competing power plays which are in turn deeply reshaping the conduct of international relations within the Gulf region, in the broader MENA region, and beyond.

Acknowledging and analyzing this departure from neutral and cautious strategies onto an increasingly aggressive outreach using both soft power and hard power, observers and scholars have been looking to identify key moments marking plausible turning points in these states' policies. In this respect, three years stand out as decisive crossroads for the countries of the Peninsula: 1990, 2003 and 2011, with many works underlining the crucial role of the emergence of immediate material or ideational threats in shaping the security strategies of the Gulf monarchies and/or of the US involvement in the Gulf in transforming the regional balance of power. Without undermining the importance of these three moments in recent Gulf history, this research note argues that the 2008 global financial crisis was at least as significant a turning point in Gulf monarchs' strategies

for the additional leverage it offered them in their bilateral and multilateral relationships with outside powers, and hence the additional chance it provided to assert their own interests.

Underlining the importance and impact of this event not only makes the case for reevaluating the role of globalization and neoliberalism in the reshaping of international relations at the global and regional level – not least because it affected the capacity and authority of many states [to] provide wellbeing and security for their populations²– but it also shows that it is crucial to analyze the strategies of the Gulf monarchies as an active quest for greater influence and power³ rather than as a mere defensive reaction to global and regional crises which occurred in the past decades. This research note indeed suggests that these crises have not only empowered Arab Gulf leaders but also fueled their rivalries to such a point that it may durably affect the paradigm of regional security and that it calls for a fundamental reassessment of our traditional understandings of (geo)politics at the regional and global levels.

A snapshot of the Gulf security paradigm as once was

The traditional Gulf security paradigm can be said to have long relied on two main and interconnected features: the emergence of a Gulf Regional Security Complex (RSC) in the early 1980s –following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the start of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980– characterized by the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 and its continuous relevance as a loose yet somewhat effective collective entity bringing together Gulf monarchs in their common quest for regime security and territorial integrity, and an overall alignment of Arab Gulf States' interests with those of their Western allies and protectors, not least because their threat perception singled out Iran as the main security challenge to the region. Yet, when

the Gulf RSC, defined through “the degree to which certain geographically grouped states spend most of their time and effort worrying about each other and not other states,”⁴ was consolidated in 1990, the threat did not come from Tehran but from Baghdad. While the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein’s troops certainly proved to GCC countries that their main security challenges came from within the Gulf region, it also confronted the smaller states of the Arabian Peninsula with a blunt reality check as they realized their attempted cooperative strategy proved a failure: they could not rely on the Saudi umbrella, let alone on themselves, to ensure their security. As a result of this and amidst the emerging new global order, they thus readjusted their security strategy.

Fostering relative autonomy without upsetting the checks and balances of the region

From 1990 onwards, the smaller Arab Gulf States, most notably the UAE and Qatar, have gradually moved from survival strategies chiefly based on external security guarantors to an exceptional form of relative autonomy. This was rendered possible by a diversification of their alliances and weapons’ providers to be less dependent on one given partner. As I argued elsewhere,⁵ they developed a very original strategy, mixing bandwagoning and balancing approaches at the regional and global levels. Being part of the GCC, they bandwagoned with KSA and tacitly relied on the US, by virtue of the security arrangements between KSA and the US, but they also started to ally more directly with the American power, which allowed them to overcome their security dilemma *within* the Peninsula. In addition to this, a few years later, they signed defense agreements with France and the UK, which helped them reach relative autonomy within the multi-level cooperative strategy they built with the US itself. Although these two smaller Gulf states reorganized their strategies as a consequence of an immediate threat to their territorial integrity, it is worth noting that they did not simply try to insure their survival, but instead chose to take advantage of the new regional and global contexts to assert their nascent autonomy and sovereignty.

What is important to underline is that while this marked the beginning of the Qatari and Emirati empowerment, particularly in terms of getting out of the Saudi shadow, their newfound relative autonomy did not undermine the GCC, nor did it come in the way of Western interests in the Gulf and beyond. If anything, this was actually a blessing for the economies of the US, France and the UK since it translated into an increasing number of lucrative arms deals still very much aimed at securing political support from powerful allies. This remark allows one to highlight two points: first, the Arab Gulf States were still using their huge economic power to ensure their security in a largely *indirect* manner; second, regional decisionmakers were not trying to use this power to impose any interest diverging from those of their Western partners. This has been changing quite a bit later on.

The global financial crisis as a turning point in the empowerment of Arab Gulf leaders

The evolving global economic context has gradually allowed the UAE, Qatar and KSA to deploy new policies to foster more sovereignty and power, which participates in a shifting of dependency logics between them and their Western allies. Not only has the 2008 financial crisis allowed them to boost their status by rescuing Western struggling economies through their sovereign wealth funds, but the associated austerity in Western security budgets has also raised their profile as a market in the global arms export race, allowing them to become more demanding in terms of capabilities of the weapons they purchase and the offsets they request as part of military contracts. While the UAE, Qatar and KSA were long engaged in a mutually dependent partnership rather than a purely dependent relation with their Western allies, their huge economic power at a time of worldwide predicament has given them a new advantage in the co-dependent relationship. Their leaders thus appear to increasingly use this power as a bargaining chip in exchange for concessions from their Western partners that are coherent with their own interests and perceptions of power dynamics in the region.

It can be argued that the new global economic context represented a turning point for the regional security paradigm for at least three different reasons. First, it marked the beginning of a new era in which Arab Gulf leaders grew increasingly aware of the fact that the – political, military, and economic– sustainability of their states relied on their ability to become less dependent both on external security guarantors and on oil as their main source of wealth. To be sure, it is perhaps not surprising that the *Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030* and the *Qatar National Vision 2030* were published around that same period. Second, the growing assertiveness of Arab Gulf leaders in their bilateral and multilateral relations on the international stage meant that the interests they have defended from then on could sometimes compete with or run counter to those of their traditional partners. For instance, the huge efforts put by Mohammed bin Zayed on economic diversification through the development of a local defense industry could eventually lead to a situation where the UAE are autonomous enough in terms of military procurement that they do not need the West anymore. Finally, and perhaps more crucially, the increasing empowerment of both Qatar and the UAE, gradually putting them on the map alongside their bigger Saudi neighbor, also led to sharper competition within the Arabian Peninsula – a trend that was confirmed and strengthened from 2011 on.

The regional turmoil as an enabler for assertive and competing Gulf power plays

The evolving regional context and the Arab uprisings, which created a power vacuum in the whole MENA region, have led the UAE, Qatar and KSA to conduct more assertive policies, using both economic and military muscles to defend themselves against direct threats to their security and stability –as was arguably the case of having GCC neighbors shaken by some unrest– but also to enforce their views as to the direction in which the broader region ought to be heading. This translated into increasing efforts to support the groups or parties which best suited their strategic agenda, with Egypt perhaps being the most telling example of this shift in their regional engagement,

not only because of the huge amounts of money the three Arab Gulf States' *riyalpolitik* in this country has represented but also for the competing interests between them that were illustrated by their contrasted support to President Morsi and, later on, to the al-Sissi regime, and for the way Gulf monarchs framed their financial support to the new Egyptian leader as compensation for the possible drop in Western investments and aid to the country following the overthrow of President Morsi.

Combined with the aforementioned shift in the global economic context, the evolutions within the MENA region, where they could increasingly defend and assert their own interests, independently from or regardless of their Western partners, have in fact led to a confirmation and strengthening of the Arab Gulf monarchs' ego-centric reflexes,⁶ allowing them to move onto competing power plays and to deeply reshape regional security dynamics. On the one hand, their assertion of rival agendas is creating additional tensions in many of the places they engage in – which has been particularly visible in places such as Syria, Libya or Yemen but also in the Horn of Africa, against the backdrop of persisting tensions between the Quartet (UAE, KSA, Bahrain, Egypt) and Qatar as well as that of the increased rivalry with Iran, which also benefited from the power vacuum associated with the unfolding of regional events since 2011. On the other hand, the shifting of dependency logics between Arab Gulf States and their Western traditional allies and protectors that might have been at play recently seems to be depriving the latter of their ability to convince their Gulf partners to behave as they see fit to ensure regional security and stability, as tends to be illustrated by the non-resolution of the Gulf crisis – which one would assume they want resolved for at least one reason: presenting a unified front to contain Iran.

What does this all mean?

Going back to the two main and interconnected features which the Gulf security paradigm has traditionally relied upon, that is a RSC characterized by the existence of the GCC as a loose yet effective collective security entity, and an overall alignment of Arab Gulf leaders' interests with

those of their Western protectors, the current state of relations within the Gulf and between regional leaders and their traditional partners seems to point to a deep shift in this paradigm. As a result of new regional and international incentives meeting with new internal priorities, foreign and defense policies of the UAE, Qatar and KSA have evolved in such a way that their strategic ties within the GCC are possibly severed beyond repair, while their relative advantage in the relationship with their Western allies appear to prevent the latter from embarking on a serious pursuit to bring everyone to their senses for the sake of regional stability. In the face of this gloomy picture, it is anyone's guess where the empowered Gulf rivals might want to bring their confrontation next, both in terms of escalating tensions and in terms of their translating in additional powerplays in the region, and beyond.

It is in any case worth noting that regional and global changes having occurred in the past ten years suggest that a reassessment of the state of international relations

and its various sub-fields as applied to the Gulf region is needed. It is for instance interesting to underline that while economic interconnection and interdependence at the regional and global levels are generally considered as pacifying factors, using this as leverage has become one of the weapons of choice of Gulf decisionmakers to endorse policies which are sometimes far from bringing additional peace or security. Connected to this broader issue, the evolving role arms deals play in regional (geo)politics is certainly a topic worth exploring, not least because it more generally points to a redefinition of power in international relations. Finally, it can be argued that recent developments in the Gulf tend to prove how important it is to move away from analysis frameworks overemphasizing the political and military aspects of security and to adopt a more comprehensive approach encapsulating risks factors in their plurality and diversity (by including economic, societal and environmental dimensions of security in the equation) – which could eventually help increase unity and cooperation.

Endnotes

- ¹ This points to the fact that military procurement in the Gulf has long been considered as a political act toward their allies and protectors more than an actual way to increase their capabilities of self-defense. Arms purchases indeed used to serve –and arguably still do, to some extent– as an instrument of foreign policy providing more security but only indirectly, through the implicit protection guarantee it buys from strategic partners. On the different incentives driving arms purchases in the Gulf, see Emma Soubrier, “Mirages of Power? From Sparkly Appearances to Empowered Apparatus, Evolving Trends and Implications of Arms Trade in Qatar and the UAE,” in David DesRoches and Dania Thayer (eds.), *The Arms Trade, Military Services and the Security Market in the Gulf*, Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2016, p. 135-151.
- ² At the workshop in Beirut, the erosion of the capacity and authority of many states linked to the proliferation of transnational flows of people, capital, and ideas that they could no longer effectively regulate was referred to by Waleed Hazbun as one of the relevant takeaways of theories developed towards the end of the Cold War to explain how global politics was being transformed by simultaneous developments at multiple scales and levels.
- ³ Or “role” on the regional and international stage, echoing May Darwich’s argument that “a change in the role of external actors has led to significant change in the regional structure and henceforth in the national role conceptions by regional actors,” building on the premise that “the foreign policy of regional actors is not only driven by interests and physical survival, but also about by social positions and standing in the system, i.e. role” ([See May Darwich’s paper](#)).
- ⁴ Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fears*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1991, cited in Gregory F. Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 3-4.
- ⁵ Emma Soubrier, “Evolving Foreign and Security Policies: A Comparative Study of Qatar and the UAE,” in Khalid Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (eds.), *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies*, New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 123-143.
- ⁶ It is in fact possible to distinguish between two levels of “egoism” in the security dynamics of these states which, associated with the strong personalization and centralization of their power, lie at the heart of their polities and strategies: the “rational egoism” of states and the “ethical egoism” of self-interest. These ego-centric reflexes constitute one of the specificities of what I call the “Prince-State.” This concept, which I developed in my PhD thesis and will soon publish on, points to a political system in which the Prince’s perception and his client and influence networks have a paramount importance in threat definition and in the development of strategies to address it – in terms of military doctrine, foreign and defense policies, external engagement, and arms trade.

Structure, Agency and External Involvement in the Syria conflict

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Barack Obama is frequently blamed for the outcomes of the Syrian civil war. The rebels' failure to defeat President Bashar al-Assad, the growth of a Jihadist presence that culminated in the declaration of ISIS' Caliphate and the intervention of Russia are frequently attributed to the then-US president's actions.¹ Such charges give considerable agency to the US president and western leaders. Yet is this accurate?

The debate over responsibility for the outcome in Syria should be understood within the terms of an ongoing debate among International Relations (IR) scholars over how much influence the choices of individual leaders have over major events such as wars and diplomacy, and how much they're constrained and directed by overarching structural conditions. The structure-agency debate in IR is long lasting and in some ways unresolvable.² The core question within these debates, whether agency or structure is more significant in determining international relations, has been of particular interest to Middle East scholars and policy makers when seeking to explain the successes and failures of the 2011 Arab Uprisings.³ Ahmed Morsy expands on these debates elsewhere in this collection, explaining how Neo-Classical Realists (NCR) have sought to bridge such divides by showing how foreign policy is produced by an interaction of domestic politics with global structural conditions.⁴

This paper argues that while the Syrian case emphasises the primary importance of global and regional structure in limiting policy, interaction with domestic politics and the agency, character and choices of leaders often determines the shape and nature of actions taken within those constraints. This paper will explore first the major international structural conditions that shaped Syria's war and then analyse key decisions by outside players over the course of the conflict, assessing how much structure and agency affected the outcome. It concludes that while leaders such as Obama always have agency, in most

cases in Syria their decisions were heavily constrained by structural factors beyond their control.

Regional and Global Structural Change

The Syria conflict, which swiftly evolved from domestic peaceful protests into multiple simultaneous civil wars and international proxy wars serves as a useful test case to contribute to this structure-agency debate, given the number of external actors involved and the number of key decisions seemingly impacting the war's outcome.

In the decade preceding Syria's uprising a series of structural changes occurred that would greatly impact the conflict and shape external player's reactions, on both regional and global levels. The regional international system was shifting to an embryonic multipolar order. Since the retreat of the Soviet Union in the 1980s the Middle East could be characterised either as a unipolar order dominated by the US and its allies, with this dominance challenged not by a peer competitor but by a weak set of players including (at different times) Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya and non-state actors Hezbollah and Hamas.⁵ This order was unsettled in the 2000s, primarily by two factors: the fallout of the 2003 Iraq war and wider global and regional economic developments, that interacted to shift several regional (and also global) structural conditions. Firstly, Iran broke out. The fall of Saddam alongside a domestic economic boom enabled Tehran to be more regionally expansive than at any time since 1979. This led to the second shift, more active Saudi Arabian involvement in Middle Eastern politics to contain its regional enemy.

Though this Saudi-Iranian rivalry produced clients and rival blocks, this did not solidify the 2000s' weak bipolar order because of a third shift: Turkey's entrance as a regional power. This was due to domestic political and economic factors – the Islamist-leaning ideology of

its ruling AK party and the hunt for new markets for a booming manufacturing sector. Qatar, benefitting from a fossil fuel boom driven by Chinese demand, also entered regional politics as an independent force. Qatar and Turkey's ambitions ensured the regional system became multipolar rather than bipolar.

A final regional structural shift was the growth of fragile states. The collapse of Iraq after 2003 and growing instability in Yemen increased the arenas for regional competition within this emerging multi-polar order. It also created space for significant Jihadist and other non-state actors. In the run up to 2003, Lebanon and, to an extent, Palestine had been the primary battleground for regional rivalries. After 2003 Iraq and Yemen were added to this list and, after 2011, Libya, Syria and (briefly) Egypt. These latter two shifts were particularly impacted by internal developments and the ambitious policies of particular leaders, while the first two owed more to external structural changes. This neatly echoes Morsy's point of how difficult it is for Neo Classical Realists to consistently place more emphasis on either structure or domestic factors to explain foreign policy change.

At the global level, the international system was also shifting, though less obviously, towards a multi-polar order. The US's imperial over stretch and failure in Iraq in 2003-11, public war weariness and the 2008 financial crisis meant the US was becoming less inclined towards interventionism.⁶ This contributed to the election of Barack Obama in 2008 who promised a withdrawal from Iraq and a tilt towards Asia. At the same time China's economy was booming and challenging the US-dominated order in South East Asia and Africa, while Russia was also becoming more assertive under Vladimir Putin. The multi-polar international order would become more visible during the course of the Syria conflict, but the ingredients were present by 2011, stretching back to the strategic blunder of the 2003 Iraq war and its unintended consequences.

This structure of regional multipolarity embedded within a declining global unipolarity would have notable consequences in Syria.

The Regional Level: Intervention from Local Powers

To illustrate how leaders' decisions interacted with and were often constrained by these structural conditions, the remainder of this paper case studies key decisions, often seen as the turning points in the conflict. Arguably the most significant decision was that made by Bashar al-Assad to violently suppress protests in 2011, which set Syria on the path to war. The internal structure of Syria's politics generates its own fascinating structure-agency debate which we don't have time to explore here. The focus instead is on the key external decisions that shaped the war, and three stand out: the decision by regional powers to sponsor Syrian fighters rather than seeking mediated solutions; the decision by the US to limit its intervention in the conflict until the emergence of ISIS in 2014; and the decision by Russia to intervene on Assad's side in 2015.

The eagerness of regional powers to send money, weapons and support to Assad and his opponents in the first years of the crisis played a major role in its rapid escalation from protests to civil war.⁷ The opposition, for example, received direct and indirect encouragement from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to pursue a military solution in the face of Assad's violent suppression in 2011-12. The embryonic Free Syria Army was allowed to base itself in Turkey in July 2011. Qatar funnelled arms to the rebels via its Libyan allies as early as November 2011, and promised \$100 million in support in February 2012. Saudi Arabia used tribal allies to procure arms in February 2012, the same month that it and Qatar urged the international community to back the rebels.⁸ This contrasted with their swift abandonment of an Arab League peace initiative barely a month after its creation in December 2011. Though they noted Assad's frequent violation of the agreement, both were arming rebels soon after its collapse, suggesting a lukewarm interest in mediation at best.

On the other side, Iran also encouraged a violent response from its ally. Iran initially urged Assad to avoid mass slaughter, but when Damascus ignored these pleas, Tehran still supported it. In 2011 the first Iranian military advisors arrived in Damascus. The next year Tehran dispatched its

Lebanese ally Hezbollah to fight the rebels, and by 2013 there was a sizeable Iranian-sponsored military contingent in Syria eventually including Iraqi, Afghani and Pakistani Shia militia, commanded by IRGC Quds force commander Qassem Suleimani. As the conflict turned violent Iran increased its military resources rather than means to peacefully resolve the crisis.

These actions were shaped by the structural changes discussed. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey showed themselves to be 'pro-war': believing violence was the quickest and most effective route to topple Assad. Qatar and Turkey's activism was enabled by the structural shifts of 2003-11, giving each the confidence to intervene. Had a similar uprising broken out in Syria in 2001, the Kemalist government in Ankara and a then-insignificant Qatar would not likely have acted the same way. Saudi Arabia likewise may have been more cautious. The growth of Iran and the perceived 'loss' of Iraq in 2003 meant many Saudi Arabian policy makers looked at Syria in 2011 as an opportunity to correct the perceived regional imbalance. Iran's position was less impacted by structural shifts. The Assad regime was an ally since 1979 and Tehran would likely have sent help if asked irrespective of the post-2003 changes. That said, the transformation of Iraq into an Iranian ally did make it easier for Iran to act: giving Iranian planes access to Iraqi air space after December 2011 allowing easier resupply to Damascus.

Such structural changes did not make the regional powers' behaviour in 2011-12 inevitable, but they transformed Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia's regional position, making their entry into the conflict seem easier and thus more likely.

The Global Level: Washington and Moscow

Despite the emerging multi-polar order, the US was still the world's most powerful actor. Had it decided to, the Obama administration would have been able to topple the Assad regime by force. The fact that it did not do so has led many to attribute Assad's survival to Obama's inaction: emphasising agency. Yet Obama was constrained by structural forces, limiting his realistic options. Obama

could have ordered a direct US-led military attack on Assad, like George W. Bush in Iraq. However, the failures of 2003 showed Obama that military-led regime change did not always produce favourable outcomes. Neo-Classical Realists would further note domestic constraints: the public were not on side as they had been after 9/11, and the economy was weak following the financial crisis. Even had he wanted to, and it certainly wasn't his preferred course, Obama would have struggled to shake off these limits.

More feasible was greater US support to rebel forces, possibly including air support, as occurred in Libya in 2011. Yet Obama did not trust the rebels sufficiently, correctly fearing Islamists and Jihadist among them, and recognised this still would be insufficient to tip the balance against Assad. He twice vetoed an arming plan by Hilary Clinton and David Petraeus for these reasons in 2012, even though he eventually relented and sent limited weapons from Spring 2013. Two structural factors came into play here. Firstly, the presence of jihadists was greatly exacerbated by the 2003 Iraq war. Secondly, the growth in power and influence of regional actors such as Qatar meant that the US struggled to monopolise the flow of arms. Indeed, in Libya when the US did back the rebels more extensively, they couldn't prevent Qatar and UAE from backing rival groups and destabilising the post-Gadhafi environment. Indeed, the debacle of post-intervention Libya further deterred Obama in Syria. Obama was also conscious that the US had a bad record of arming proxies going back decades. In that sense perhaps Obama's agency did come into play as he was much more willing to reject the foreign policy establishment's usual tools in an attempt to avoid past mistakes.⁹

Obama's twin decisions on direct strikes – not to go through with a prepared attack on Assad in September 2013 after he allegedly used chemical weapons, and putting together an international coalition against ISIS in Iraq and Syria in 2014 – also suggest considerable agency. The US military and White House staff were fully prepared for a missile strike on Damascus in 2013, only for Obama himself to defer at the last moment. Echoing Kristian Coates Ulrichsen's point elsewhere in this collection about the significance of 'middle

powers; the UK parliament's vote not to join the strikes seems to have contributed to the president's wavering. Obama eventually reasoned that he would more effectively remove chemical weapons from Syria via a proposed deal with Russia. Yet this was not all down to his agency and structural factors came into play. Russia's increased global importance made it a viable partner to facilitate a deal. Obama's caution also stemmed from a fear that the strike would set a precedent and suck the US into another Middle Eastern quagmire – something he was reluctant to do after unpopular failures in Iraq and Libya.

So why did Obama then launch a direct intervention in Syria barely a year later, against ISIS rather than Assad? Though the arena was the same, the mission was quite different. In 2013 the attack would have been to protect the international norm against using chemical weapons and possibly to help topple a dictator. In 2014 Obama's intervention, while also having a humanitarian framing in preventing a Yezidi genocide in Iraq, was presented domestically as counter-terrorism. Unlike in 2013 Obama made no attempt to seek congressional approval, launching it via executive order. This might suggest Obama's agency is the best explanation. However, there were strong structural drivers. The growth of Jihadists actors like ISIS had emerged out of the structural changes of the 2000s: the chaos of post-2003 Iraq. While Obama did not seek congressional approval, there was broad support for his actions, unlike in 2013 when Obama's aides feared he might lose any vote.¹⁰ After 9/11 US law makers and public opinion were broadly united on the need to confront jihadists, whereas the perceived threat from dictators like Assad was far less.¹¹ In fact, in the post 9/11 era it is hard to imagine many US presidents being less confrontational than Obama on groups such as ISIS.

A third and final key decision was Moscow sending its air force to Syria in 2015, later supported by Special Forces and military police, which shifted the conflict decisively in Assad's favour. While victory was still not guaranteed, Assad's defeat was off the cards from this point. This intervention was the product of several actions. Firstly, Iran's appeal to Moscow for help – sending Suleimani

to Moscow in summer 2015. Secondly, President Putin's decision to act. There were several motives behind his involvement that show the NCR's interplay between domestic and foreign factors: a desire to contain radical Islamists that might infiltrate southern Russia; appealing to Russian Orthodox supporters by protecting Syria's Christians; asserting Russia's resurgent foreign policy against the West; and providing combat experience for the Russian military. However, the timing of the intervention was due to an imminent threat that Assad might collapse.

The agency factor here is quite strong. Structurally, the emerging multi-polar global order which permitted Russia to be more active came about due to factors beyond Russia's control: the economic boom of China in the 2000s and the imperial and financial over-stretch of the US. Yet how Moscow inserted itself into this order owed much to the policies of its leader, which are either ingenious or reckless depending on your perspective.¹² Putin responded aggressively to the changing regional environment. The 2008 Georgia war was a prelude to further military and covert operations including the Ukraine campaign and annexation of Crimea in 2013-14, the intervention in Syria in 2015, interference in the US election of 2016 and various acts of espionage in the UK. In the Syrian case, while the structural forces perhaps necessitated Russian involvement to save its ally, the form it took seemed very 'Putinist'. Russia could, for example, have sent planes to be commanded by Syrian pilots or to be under Assad's command. Yet Putin intervened directly – making a significant geopolitical statement beyond just saving Assad. The shifting structure of the international system provided space for Russia to act, in this case deterring the US from becoming directly involved and potentially blocking Moscow's 2015 intervention, but it was Putin's agency that determined the shape of the involvement.

Conclusion: Structure Over Agency?

The actions of international leaders impacted how the Syria conflict played out and personality mattered. Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Emir Hamad of Qatar were both ambitious and interventionist while alternative

leaders may have been less reckless. Likewise, Obama was instinctively cautious, while Putin was a gambler. However, the options available to them were enabled or constrained by the structural environment in which they operated. Erdogan and Hamad were only able to act because space had opened up in the emerging multi-polar regional order. Obama was cautious because of US imperial overstretch and Putin felt he could be reckless because of structural US retreat. In some cases structure seems particularly dominant. This is especially so with Iran and Saudi Arabia, whose regional enmity appears relatively fixed, whoever is in charge.

Individual decisions did shape specific outcomes, such as Obama's decision to call off his strike in 2013 or Putin's to intervene in 2015. However, the overall trends

seemed more directed by structure. Putin was likely to prop up Assad, even if the shape of the intervention was particular to him. Obama could have gone ahead in 2013, but he would not likely have allowed himself to be sucked further into the Syria conflict. His strike may have ended up like Donald Trump's hits on Assad in 2017 and 2018: a rap on the knuckles, but not the decisive intervention oppositionists hoped for. The fact that Trump has not substantially stepped up US Syria policy, despite posing as the anti-Obama, reinforces the notion that structure rather than agency drove responses to this conflict. Obama may frequently be blamed for the outcome of the war, but in reality regional and global structural conditions appear more important in driving the Syria conflict than the agency of whoever was sitting in the White House.

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- ¹¹ The importance of perception is expanded on and explored elsewhere in this collection. For example, May Darwich discusses the role of perceived roles in regional politics and how those roles can change, while Curtis Ryan and Ahmed Morsy both reconsider Steven Walt's classic text on the importance of perceived threat in explaining alliances and behavior.
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From State-Building to State-Fraying Permeability: NSAs in the Post-Popular Uprisings Arab World

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The rise of armed, sectarian, local or transnational nonstate actors (NSAs) is one of the main consequences of the sectarianization¹ of geopolitical contests unleashed after the popular uprisings, and the concomitant “return of the weak Arab state.”² Whether in Lebanon and Yemen, where these actors long predated the popular uprisings, or in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, local and transnational nonstate actors assumed paramount domestic and proxy transnational geopolitical roles. While it may be that “there is nothing new about cross-border politics in the Middle East,”³ this explosion of local or transnational armed nonstate actors underscores a reversal of the logic of the Arab state system’s permeability of the 1950s and 1960s, when transnational ideology was deployed by regimes for state-building purposes.

Post-independence Arab states were institutionally and ideologically weak and exposed to transnational ideological currents. Throughout the geopolitical battles of “the Arab Cold War,” from 1958 to 1970,⁴ regional states, but chiefly Jamal Abdul Nasser’s Egypt, used the Arab state system’s ideological permeability to align with domestic actors in different countries in the quest to advance their own geopolitical interests. But as Rex Brynen demonstrated in his now classic study of the uses of the regime-induced, top-down permeability of that period, by the late 1970s, Arab states had drastically reduced their vulnerability to cross-border ideological permeability. Authoritarian regimes engaged in sustained state-building efforts, organizing state-society relations in different corporatist strategies that gave them a substantial measure of control over the political arena.⁵ There were always exceptions to this trend: the perennially weak states of Lebanon and Yemen, for example, with their powerful sectarian or tribal and regional nonstate actors and sentiments. Beyond these exceptions, however, the ‘hard’ Arab state, with its

fearsome coercive apparatus, militarized state-society relations, and neopatrimonial management of economic resources, had replaced the ‘soft’ one of past decades. The Arab state system had moved from one governed by the logic of *raison de la nation* to that of *raison d’état*.⁶

By the 1990s, however, a new regional permeability was produced but this time from below, propelled by new information and communication technologies and by shared political and economic grievances.⁷ This new permeability goes a long way in explaining the diffusion effects propelling the 2011 popular uprisings from one Arab capital to another. For though the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were caused by deep but similar structural transformations— namely, “growing inequality and economic exclusion, deepening economic insecurity, the pervasiveness of corruption, and the capture of economic liberalization programs by crony capitalists tightly linked to regime elites”⁸— their spread across states can only be explained by the regional system’s new bottom-up transnational permeability. It is this novel type of bottom-up permeability that has proved instrumental in weakening or destroying a number of Arab states after the popular uprisings. By the time the region’s geopolitical battles were sectarianized after the popular uprisings, the top-down state-building permeability of the past was replaced by a bottom-up state-destroying permeability driven by sectarian, ethnic, or tribal identities, nonstate actors, and decades of misrule and poor governance. The ideology of Arab nationalism, which was once deployed for state-building purposes was now replaced by divisive sectarian ideological discourses and actors. In Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, local and transnational NSAs torpedoed state institutions, rendered territorial borders meaningless, and played an instrumental role in the proxy regional wars unleashed after the popular uprisings.

¹ This memo is part of a larger on-going “Sectarianism, Proxies and De-Sectarianisation Project” (SEPAD), at: <https://www.sepad.org.uk/about>.

What are the implications of the rise of armed, sectarian, local or transnational, nonstate actors operating in the context of a new kind of transnational permeability on what have always been or recently become, as a result of the overlapping domestic and geopolitical battles unleashed by the popular uprisings, weak Arab states? Two broad patterns may be outlined despite the dizzying array of NSAs operating across the Arab world, and their different contexts.

The rise of armed NSAs as a result of the collapse of the once centralized, unitary, authoritarian Arab state among “specific groups endowed with specific understandings of their histories,” who consider themselves “heirs of state-building projects forsaken during the 20th century,”⁹ is bound to intensify demands for greater decentralization and autonomy along ethnic or tribal lines. This is especially true of the Kurds in northeast and northern Syria but also in northern Iraq, the Cyrenaic separatists in eastern Libya, and the secessionist al-Hirak al-Janubi in southern Yemen. Regional autonomy may also be the only way to accommodate Houthi socioeconomic and political demands in northern Yemen once a semblance of order is restored. Yemen is in fact a case on its own where who is the state actor and who is the NSA is in perpetual flux. This is most evident in the “patchwork security” scheme that governs relations between remnants of the former regular armed forces and the country’s old and new NSAs affiliated with external patrons: On one hand, “remnants of the former regular armed forces confer legitimacy on non-state militias, turning them into regular security actors ... on the other hand, segments of the former official armed forces act as auxiliary forces of the militias.”¹⁰

Equally important is the effect of non-regionally concentrated armed, sectarian, NSAs on the future of weak Arab states. Here we have a complicated spectrum of subtypes, from Hezbollah in Lebanon, the variety of NSAs gathered in the not so ideologically homogenous Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) in Iraq, to the relation between formal military structures and informal but pro-regime militias in Syria.

In the case of Hezbollah, a local and transnational armed, sectarian NSA occupies simultaneously a paradoxical place both in society and in the state, but also in the region’s multiple security dilemmas. This has created what Aram Nerguizian labels a situation of “military dualism” between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), one that may develop in the future into a contest over the country’s national security policies – as was the case during the LAF’s 2017 Fajr al-Jurud (Dawn of the Hills) military operation against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹¹ Moreover, the borders between the Hezbollah-in-society and the Hezbollah-in-the-state are increasingly becoming blurred. As Hezbollah redeploys away from the Syrian battlefield, it will increasingly look to the state, both as resources and bureaucratic positions, to maintain its political economic obligations towards its sectarian constituency. This entails denser interactions with state institutions, a prospect that, in turn, exposes Lebanon to potential sanctions from the US. But in this case the battle over political mobilization is largely settled along sectarian lines. Perhaps Lebanon is the context where these dynamics are most visible because confessional and sectarian identities were institutionalized at the founding of the state. The political economy of sectarianism has produced a concomitant ideological hegemony.¹²

This is not the case in Iraq, however. For what the recent Basra protests suggest is that the battle over sectarian or socioeconomic modes of political representation, and hence what kind of state will emerge, has not been settled yet.¹³ If those championing strictly and only sectarian or ethnic modes of political mobilization – a posse that includes Iran, the US, almost all of the post-invasion sectarian Shi’a and Sunni political elite, plus the Kurdish political parties, in opposition to the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), the labor unions, and those dispossessed in Iraq’s southern provinces but mobilized by socioeconomic rather than sectarian interests – manage to impose their ideological hegemony over Iraqi society,¹⁴ then Iraq’s NSAs will in due course follow Hezbollah’s model, colonizing the state from below, capturing its institutions and resources, and deploying them to establish their ideological hegemony and clientelist political economic

obligations. In this case Iraq's future will look increasingly like Lebanon's present. But if sectarian identities fail to assume a monopoly over political representation, then the state in Iraq will be contested along a mix of interest-based and identity-based dynamics. Muqtada al-Sadr is an exceptional case in this regard: mobilizing the dispossessed along both sectarian *and* national/socioeconomic lines for narrow political purposes.¹⁵

In fact, the process of capturing the state and its institutions along sectarian and ethnic modes of mobilization has progressed substantially in Iraq. Many state institutions have been captured by single sectarian militias – as in Bader Organization's capture of the Ministry of Interior, to say nothing of the Kurdish *peshmerga's* control in the north of the country. Moreover, Executive Order 91 of February 2016 rendered the institutionalization of the PMUs legal, thus incorporating them into the formal structures of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). In some places this has subordinated the PMUs to the ISF's chain of command, but in others this has proved impossible, with disastrous implications to inter-sectarian relations.¹⁶ Moreover, the Fateh Coalition gathering 18 of the PMUs' 70 NSAs, led by Hadi al-Ameri's Bader Organization and Qais al-Khazali's 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, like Hizbullah in Lebanon, now sits both outside and inside state institutions with its deep clientelist networks and 47 parliamentary seats captured in the 2018 elections, in addition to its transnational geopolitical reach. The result is PMU capture of significant sections of the Iraqi state, the blurring of the lines between formal and informal state actors, and a much more complicated military and security pluralism than that found in Lebanon.

Transnational and local NSAs in Syria have similarly played an instrumental role in the "hollowing out" of state institutions. The overlapping domestic and geopolitical war over Syria transformed what was once a "shadow state" run by multiple security agencies into a "transactional state" that relies on transactional relations with local or proxy NSAs, but also with other actors embedded in state institutions possessing their own narrow interests, to survive and provide services to the population.¹⁷

The organic connection between the regime's formal force structure and the pro-regime informal sectarian militias that emerged during the war suggests that even if the former were able to absorb the latter, paramilitary commanders will not lose their wartime power.¹⁸ This is bound to expose state institutions to postwar clientelist dynamics and predatory behavior.

What these varied interactions between the state and armed, sectarian NSAs increasingly reflect is "the fraying of the façade of the state system"¹⁹ in the Arab world, to quote Lisa Anderson's poignant formulation. Weak Arab states are increasingly beleaguered by NSAs operating both domestically and transnationally, challenging state authority both vertically and horizontally. They want the state's resources and institutions, and its cover from an increasingly hostile international order – as, for example, in the form of the 2017 US Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Amendments Act (HIFPAA) that targets foreign individuals and companies who voluntarily offer financial, material or technological support to Hizbullah and its subsidiaries,²⁰ but not its monopoly over the use of legitimate force, its institutional capabilities, or borders. This ultimately produces a state that neither can nor wants to act *as* a state.²¹ It is rather an archipelago of clientelist interests organized around largely identity-based loyalties and dotted by NSAs operating in the context of hybridized security structures where, in a situation of state collapse and economic crisis, "incumbent political elites have been unable to block the emergence of informal security providers and other non-state armed actors, or else actively encouraged their rise in order to outsource the burden of security to them."²² Moreover, many same-sect NSAs, but especially Hizbullah and 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, are linked by transnational geopolitical obligations that may render the spill-over effects of any future regional conflict impossible to contain. This combination of frayed Arab states, armed NSAs operating locally and in proxy capacity, and a new form of crude sectarian ideological permeability is the ideal combustible mix for a protracted period of regional instability and socioeconomic stagnation with disastrous consequences but no end in sight.

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Saudi Arabian military activism in Yemen: Interactions between the domestic and the systemic level

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The Saudi-led intervention into Yemen that was announced on March 26, 2015, marked a departure in the direction of a more activist Saudi foreign policy. Saudi Arabia had previously undertaken smaller-scale military campaigns in neighboring countries, such as a short intervention against the Houthis in 2009, and the deployment of Saudi troops into Bahrain to shore up the regime there early on in the Arab Spring.¹ However, the Saudi air campaign in Yemen marks a break because of its intensity and ambition.² This break has frequently been explained by reference to internal Saudi politics, especially the changing of the guard that has led to the ascendance of Mohamed bin Salman, Minister of Defense and Crown Prince since 2017, who is widely considered the mastermind of the Yemen intervention.³ There are other explanations focusing on the importance of structural shifts following the Arab uprisings and the at least perceived disengagement of the US from the region. The more structural explanations gain credence from the oft-repeated truism that the Middle East as a region is particularly penetrated by external powers.

The case of the sustained Saudi-led intervention into Yemen illustrates how the foreign policy of states is shaped by a mix of dynamics internal to the state and the global and regional environments in which they operate (See [Ahmed Morsy's paper](#) in this collection).⁴ This paper points to some of the key elements in the interactions between national interest and changes in the broader global and regional environment in the specific context of the Saudi-led military intervention into Yemen. To do this, the paper will first outline the domestic conditions within Saudi Arabia that impacted the decision to intervene militarily in the Yemeni conflict and then analyze how key developments at regional and international level has interacted with domestic factors. The analysis emphasizes the importance of the domestic level, specifically as it relates to the survival of the Saudi regime but argues that

specific policy choices are influenced by broader structural shifts at the regional and international level.

Saudi Arabia since 2015: Internal weaknesses and external relations

The ascent of King Salman to the throne in early 2015 ushered in a period of change in the Saudi internal elite. Most notably, he restructured the line of succession; first in 2015 when his son, Mohammed bin Salman, was named defense minister, and again in June 2017 where Mohammed bin Salman became Crown Prince at the age of 33.⁵ The unprecedented centralization of power in the hands of Muhammed bin Salman has taken place at the expense of several older princes, who have largely remained silent so far but who may object to the centralization of power.⁶ Additionally, the Saudi economy was weakened by low oil prices leading to increased pressure on the ineffective public sector. The result has been a gradual undermining of the Saudi Arabian social contract that exchanges limited political freedom for substantial economic benefits, as seen in youth unemployment rates of approximately 30%.⁷ Muhammed bin Salman has sought to address this through "Saudi Arabia's Vision for 2030," an ambitious package of economic and social reforms.

Finally, there has been brewing internal unrest within the kingdom, most notably in the Eastern Province. The Eastern Province is both home to Saudi Arabia's minority of Shia, that make up approximately 10-15% of the population, and the bulk of Saudi Arabia's crude oil production capacity. The Saudi regime has violently cracked down on dissent, which has, in part, been justified by painting the Shia as disloyal to the Saudi regime and the resulting protests as potentially being a cover for Iranian attempts at destabilizing Saudi Arabia.⁸ The precarious position of the Shia inside Saudi Arabia illustrates the link between internal and external factors, as the presence of

a domestic challenge is framed as being part of a regional competition with Iran.

While domestic changes explain some of the shifts in Saudi foreign policy, the structural context at the regional and international level matters as well. The key aspect in relation to understanding the regional context of Saudi Arabia is its rivalry with Iran. The current Saudi regime sees Iran as the major enemy and has been extremely critical of Iran's policy of supporting (armed) non-state actors in the region to achieve its foreign policy goals. Thus, Saudi Arabia has moved to counteract the increased influence of Iran in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon by seeking to build strategic alliances. Yet, the efforts to thwart the increasing influence of Iran in the region has been hampered by the blockade of Qatar since the summer of 2017 by the Saudi-led alliance of Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE, as it has underscored the lack of a united anti-Iranian front.⁹

The concern with Iran is shared with the current American administration. The Trump administration sees Iran as the main disrupter of peace in the Middle East. The most pivotal consequence of this has been the American withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the 2015 nuclear deal, a decision that President Trump defended at the opening of the 73rd UN General Assembly on 25 September 2018, where he referred to Iran as “the world’s leading sponsor of terrorism.”¹⁰ There has been a rapprochement between the US and Saudi Arabia during the Trump presidency. The US under Trump sees Saudi Arabia as a strategic partner to promote regional security and global economic stability.¹¹ Trump has indicated that Saudi Arabia must pay for itself such as when he recently exclaimed that: “And I love the King, King Salman. But I said ‘King - we’re protecting you - you might not be there for two weeks without us— you have to pay for your military.’”¹² But the Saudi regime still believes that Trump is a better partner than Obama or perhaps just a more manageable one, because of the common threat perception towards Iran. In the specific case, Mohammed bin Salman called the Trump statement a “misunderstanding” and instead took the opportunity to criticize Obama.¹³ This narrative

of opposition to Obama, an “anti-Obama imperative,” resonates strongly with Trump.¹⁴

This relationship cannot be reduced to a simple bargain of oil for security although the position of Saudi Arabia as the holder of the second largest proven oil reserves in the world certainly has played a role in securing the Kingdom military support from the US.¹⁵

The Saudi-led intervention into Yemen

The 2015 intervention in Yemen illustrates the interaction between the internal and external dimensions of Saudi policy. MBS has voiced a desire for the Kingdom to be more assertive in shaping events in the Middle East and countering the influence of Iran.¹⁶ He made the intervention into Yemen the symbol of his assertive foreign policy and thus, a key element in strengthening his position as the successor to the crown in the face of substantial internal challenges. The intervention was initially popular within Saudi Arabia and as such presented an opportunity to project an image of strong and decisive leadership and Mohammed bin Salman as a man of action. It boosted a sense of Saudi nationalism as it was framed as Saudi Arabia taking a strong stance against the perceived continued encroachments of Iran. MBS has resisted changing policy even as the intervention failed to achieve rapid or decisive victory and has played a substantial role in pushing Yemen towards what the UN refer to as the world’s current worst humanitarian crisis.¹⁷

The uprising in Yemen in 2011, that forced the president of 33-years, Ali Abdullah Saleh to resign, ended with a negotiated transition guided by the so-called GCC Agreement. The agreement was criticized for being overly focused on stabilization as it largely retained the status quo for the political elites of the country.¹⁸ While the UN supported political negotiations went ahead in Sana’a as stipulated in the GCC agreement, tensions were growing as the economy and security situation continued to deteriorate. In September 2014, the Houthis militarily seized control of the Yemeni capital, Sana’a, facilitated by a deal with the former president Saleh who continued to

wield substantial influence. Although the Houthis framed these events as a continuation of the 2011 revolution, the Houthis became increasingly unwilling to share power, leading to the flight of the interim but internationally recognized President Hadi from Sana'a in early 2015.¹⁹ In March 2015, the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen commenced with the aim of reversing the Houthi takeover and return Hadi to power.

There is an often told story of how, while on his deathbed, the founder of Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman al-Saud, warned his sons that “the good or evil for us will come from Yemen.”²⁰ Whether true or not, the story illustrates how Saudi Arabia’s approach to Yemen has been shaped by a focus on containing the perceived security risk emanating from Yemen. The stated objective of the Saudi-led intervention was “to defend the legitimate government of President Hadi” who had requested help based on article 51 of the UN Charter.²¹ The intervention has also been legitimized through the right to self-defense. The Saudis consistently refer to the Houthis as an Iranian-backed militia. In the Saudi narrative, the Houthis not only threaten the Yemeni population but also Saudi Arabia itself. The Houthis have carried out numerous cross border attacks and at several occasions launched missiles deep into Saudi territory. Saudi Arabia see the Houthis as Iran’s pro-longed arm and has presented the intervention as necessary to prevent a regional plot that threatened to destabilize the Arabian Peninsula.²²

The linkage of the intervention to the regional rivalry with Iran – as well as the way MBS has made Yemen a symbol of his foreign policy – has made it difficult for the Saudis to either withdraw or accept a negotiated peace deal that would see the Houthis sustain substantial political and military influence in Yemen. Thus, whereas Saudi Arabia could relatively unscathed withdraw from their intervention in Yemen in 2009 despite it being framed as largely unsuccessful, it seems unlikely that Muhammed bin Salman will accept, or be able to accept, withdrawal from the current intervention into Yemen without being able to at least symbolically declaring the war a victory.

The international context does less to explain the Yemen intervention than the regional or domestic levels. Both Obama and Trump supported the Saudi-led intervention into Yemen. The Obama administration largely backed the intervention in order to support an ally at a time of considerable intra-alliance tension. The US has limited direct interest in Yemen beyond concerns over terrorism, and have a well-established tradition of approaching the perceived anarchy of Yemen through airstrikes.²³ While the Obama administration supported the intervention relatively quietly, the Trump administration has widely adopted the narrative of the Houthis as Iranian puppets.²⁴ The combination of improved personal relations between Trump and Mohammed bin Salman, which is undergirded by a shared perception of Iran as the biggest threat in the region, and an American desire to delegate to regional allies, has worked to give Saudi Arabia free reigns in Yemen. Thus, the Saudis have carried out the military operations in Yemen with U.S.- trained Saudi personnel with U.S. logistical assistance, and shared intelligence using U.S.-origin weaponry.²⁵

There is an economic dimension as well. The Yemen war has become “a huge financial boon for American and British defense contractors (and their shareholders)” despite concerns over the humanitarian crisis.²⁶ Trump has underlined that the bilateral relationship between the US and KSA is transactional and that a key component of this is that the Saudis arms purchases move forward.²⁷ However, as civilian casualties mount in Yemen, there has been increased internal pressure on the Trump administration to limit arms sales to Saudi Arabia. These have so far been unsuccessful although recent events following the murder of the Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, seem to have led to some, at least rhetorical, changes in the Trump administration’s approach to the Saudi intervention in Yemen.²⁸ There is no doubt that the US is a key partner for Saudi Arabia as outlined above, but events also demonstrate that the US cannot dictate the policies of Saudi Arabia.

Interactions between the internal and the external in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy

The desire of Mohammed bin Salman to use a more assertive foreign policy as a way of boosting his internal powerbase has not just been visible in relation to the intervention into Yemen. Mohammed bin Salman has effectively undermined the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) framework that currently seems largely defunct as brought to the fore by Qatar standoff. MBS's move away from the regional framework and towards a more security centered approach to regional affairs is echoed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE has played a major role in Yemen, particularly in the south of Yemen where the UAE have a large presence on the ground while it has also provided substantial support to building a network of loyal militias and political actors. The two states have chosen different but complementary strategies that reflect their separate policy preferences in Yemen. Whereas Saudi Arabia is enmeshed in an unwinnable and publicized air campaign, UAE has focused on gradually building its

influence on the ground in a strategy designed to integrate Yemen, and its strategically placed ports, as part of a broader policy towards the Horn of Africa.

The current Saudi assertiveness is less a result of internal strength, and more an attempt by Muhammed bin Salman to use external assertiveness to build his internal reputation. The potential weakness of the Saudi regime adds a layer of complexity and unpredictability to the analysis. It can be argued that the increased fragmentation and the bilateral character of relationships based on transactional cost-benefit analysis has increased the importance of personal relationships.²⁹ Moreover, it could be argued that the direct and personal linkage of Muhammed bin Salman to the intervention into Yemen has had the unfortunate side effect of making it difficult for the Saudis to withdraw without a, at least, symbolic victory as this would weaken Muhammed bin Salman internally. At least so far, the Saudi regime have chosen to continue the intervention in Yemen despite its substantial costs and limited outcomes rather than risk internal blowback.

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Alliances and Threats in the Middle East: Neoclassical Realism and the Balance of Interest

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Egyptian-Iranian relations offer a useful window into the dynamics of regional politics discussed throughout this collection. In the 1950s, Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt approached Iran with animosity, but in the 1970s Anwar Sadat befriending the Shah. Egyptian-Iranian relations went through what could be called normalized stagnation under Hosni Mubarak. Mohammed Morsi's brief attempt at openness to Iran quickly faded, but Abdelfattah el-Sisi's Egypt has not been nearly as focused on Iran as his regime's sponsors in the Gulf might like. What explains the zig-zag trajectory of Egypt's policy toward Iran?

I argue that Egyptian-Iranian relations cannot be explained solely through the structural level of analysis or via identity and ideology alone. Individual leaders, perceptions, and domestic politics play an important role in shaping the regime's alliances and policies. An analysis built on Neoclassical Realism and Randall Schweller's Balance of Interest approach can best explain the changes in Egypt's policy toward Iran. This requires careful attention to Egyptian leaders' ideas and views of structural conditions and their distinctive perceptions of threat.

Neoclassical Realism (NCR): A Valuable Foreign Policy Tool

Theorists of Neoclassical Realism (NCR) attempt to explain foreign policy decisions by employing elements of the realist approach to international relations, while incorporating domestic-level analysis. Gideon Rose argues that "a theory of foreign policy limited to systemic factors alone is bound to be inaccurate much of the time."¹ Therefore, to be able to analyze how states understand and deal with the external threats and dynamics, the analysis must include unit level intervening variables like the decision-maker's perceptions and domestic state structures since state leaders can be constrained by internal as well

as external politics. This provides a solid theoretical framework that manage to bridge the spatial (domestic–international), the cognitive (matter-ideas), and the temporal (present–future).² By re-introducing domestic politics and state structure to realism, neoclassical scholars challenge the exclusivity of the unit level analysis claimed by liberalism and constructivism.³

To support their alternative approach, neoclassical realists maintain that unlike the balance of power approach, the structure of the system does not predetermine the decisions made by the state. Rather, it provides the actors with opportunities and constraints "within the predefined geopolitical context."⁴ Despite the external geopolitical structure, "a perceptual layer at policymaker level also affects the operationalization of that structure."⁵ In other words, the "complex domestic processes act as transmission belts that channel, mediate, and (re)direct policy outputs in response to external forces."⁶ Material structure, then, is not enough to explain state behavior. There is also an important role played by domestic politics and the leadership regarding foreign policy, alliance decisions, and threat perception.

Balance of Interest Theory: An Understudied Approach

Randall Schweller developed an important but understudied approach, *the balance of interest* (BoI). Schweller argues that while Walt's balance of threat, for all its value, is not entirely adequate to explain the full range of foreign policy choices. Walt's definition and usage of bandwagoning reflects a status-quo bias and excludes *profit* as a common form of bandwagoning by focusing only on *security*.⁷ Schweller highlights that alliances are not only motivated by threat, fear and danger, but it's also driven by opportunities and profits. He emphasizes that balancing and bandwagoning are not opposite behavior,

since “bandwagoning is commonly done in the expectation of making gains; while balancing is done for security and it always entails costs.”⁸

Schweller highlighted four forms of bandwagoning

1. *Jackal bandwagoning*, is when a (limited revisionist) state ally (bandwagon) with the rising (unlimited-revisionist) expansionist power or coalition seeking to upset the current status quo. In this case, system stability is expected to decrease.
2. *Piling-on*, is when a state sides with the stronger status quo powers to claim unearned spoils and benefits. If the pile-on decision is based on opportunity, then it’s seen as a form of *jackal bandwagoning*. On the other hand, states may decide to pile-on out of fear the strong state or coalition might harm them if they did not side against the losers.⁹ In all cases, the piling-on behavior would lead to increase stability of the system and diminish risks post conflict.
3. *Wave-of-the-Future*, is when a state ally with a stronger power because it represents the new wave. This type of bandwagoning is “induced by charismatic leaders and dynamic ideologies, especially when buoyed by massive propaganda campaigns and demonstrations of superiority on the battlefield.”¹⁰
4. *The Contagion or Domino effect*, by which an external force or incident triggers a chain reaction within a country or a region, fueling a bandwagon process.¹¹

A bandwagoning tendency can be seen in Egypt’s foreign policies since Gamal Abdel Nasser. However, Egypt’s role shifted over the time from the leader of the bandwagon to the follower and dependent. Despite being situated in the same geo-political zone, the foreign policies of Egypt and Iran represented sharp contrasts and reflected their revisionist versus status quo positions over time and leadership.

Egypt policy toward Iran: A Bandwagon for Reward Case

There are good structural realist reasons to believe that Egypt and Iran might cooperate as they have the size and military power to imagine a bid for regional stability. Despite mutual potential benefits from normalized bilateral relations, a range of factors prevented them from doing so. Those obstacles included: the geo-political perceptions of the leaders; domestic political and economic considerations; regional and external alliances and competing visions of regional order. Under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Mohamed Reza Shah, the two regional powers were on the opposite side of the revolutionary-conservative divide which structured regional politics. After 1979, the radical reorientation of Iran’s foreign policy after its revolution and the strengthening of Egypt’s alliances with the United States and the Gulf monarchies, and sustained peace with Israel are directly correlated to aloof Egyptian-Iranian relations.

Egyptian-Iranian relations do not travel in a straight line between both capitals in which a decision by one is directly affecting or influencing the decision of the other. Egyptian policies are filtered through the leaders’ perspectives and regime’s interests, in addition to the regional and systemic structures. Neither Realism nor ideological accounts alone suffice. It is possible to view Egyptian post-1979 policy as an ideological balancing act against an “ideologically-motivated actor pursuing power in the name of Islamic revolution.” But it can also be perceived as bandwagoning with the United States and Saudi Arabia against a powerful state – Iran - that is “pursuing self-interest in an anarchic and high risk environment.”¹² What bridges this analytical divide is the common recognition that Iranian activities since 1979 were perceived by Egypt as revisionist and represent a challenge to the regional configuration and status-quo which Egypt believes to be beneficial and important to its survival.

During the second half of the 1950’s and during the 1960’s, Egypt played the role of the regional bandwagon-master that was working to attract other states to its orbit. In Schweller’s terms, Nasser’s Egypt was a “*Wolf*” – an

unsatisfied regional power that aims to challenge the regional status-quo and restructure the region. Nasser believed in Egypt's leading role in the Arab world and as a potential regional hegemon. He used several tactics from ideological rhetoric (Pan Arabism) and robust propaganda machine to economic and military assistance supporting Arab and African independence movements. Egypt was also a *Jackal* (on the international level) that tried to benefit from the superpower rivalry and Cold War politics while pretending neutralism. For instance, it was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), yet it depended on Soviet arms and benefited from the food aid program of the United States among other benefits it extracted from the bi-polarity. In short, Nasser's galvanizing rhetoric and rising power in the Arab world made Egypt the bandwagon from which other states hoped for benefits and better positioning in the region. This stood in contract to Iran, which represented a status-quo power under the Shah who enjoyed Western support and friendly relations with Israel.¹³ These divergent positions on the regional level and dynamics best explain the tension between Egypt and Iran in the 1950s and 1960s.

After assuming the Presidency in 1970, Anwar Sadat realized that Arabism no longer fit with his goals of economic liberalization and peace. Sadat restructured Egypt's foreign policy from an aspiring regional hegemon with state-led socialist policy and anti-imperial rhetoric to a benign state with an 'Egypt-first' approach and western-like aims. Sadat's objective was to gain as much benefits from his restructuring policies that would support the war and peace plans and help transform Egypt into capitalism – or the *Wave of the Future* – as described by Schweller. Sadat's tenure saw the closest relations with Iran, which at the time was the only country in the region with close ties to both Washington and Tel Aviv. This appeared in the steady communication and dialogue, the various bilateral agreements and Iranian investments, and the Iranian support to the peace process. The changing regional alignments as well as Sadat's objectives were the main reasons for the Egyptian-Iranian entente. Both Sadat and the Shah thought they could extract a win-win formula from their cooperation especially that both

were bandwagoning with the U.S. for a bigger regional role under the Cold War dynamics.¹⁴ Sadat believed that aligning with the United States would provide much needed benefits for Egypt and that liberal western political and economic policies are the next *wave of the future* as opposed to the Soviet model. By the end of his tenure, Egypt has effectively moved into the *Pax-Americana*. During the 1970s, then, Egypt and Iran shared the same orientation towards regional order, which helped them align their policies and overcome the previous decades of mistrust.

The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and Egypt's peace treaty with Israel changed the regional dynamics and alliances and soured the relationship between both nations because Iran now adopted a revisionist perspective on the regional order it had previously backed, and which Egypt had now been firmly embedded within. Ayatollah Khomeini used the Pan-Islamic revolutionary rhetoric to discredit all the western allied regimes and call for a change in the regional structure – a reminder of Nasser's Pan-Arabism strategy. Iran since 1979 has represented a dissatisfied power that is more risk-averse and willing to take steps to advance its status and possessions within the region. The Iranian leaders have - and continue to - look for ways to assert their presence and regional influence through various means. Tehran understood that keeping the 'revolutionary regime' intact and alive means being a dynamic and active player in the region. They sponsored aggressive rhetoric, strategic maneuvering, and built political alliances – on sectarian and pragmatic basis - as tools for regional influence. Clear examples include Iran's influence in Lebanon through Hezbollah; their support to Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas against Israel; their strong hold over Iraq post 2003; fighting on behalf of the Syrian regime to keep it alive; and supporting the Houthis in Yemen.

Egypt under Hosni Mubarak, on the other hand, represented a core pillar of the regional status-quo. Mubarak continued Sadat's policies, using the regional changes of the 1980's to obtain benefits – mostly financial and domestic legitimation - from rapprochement with

the Arab countries and consolidating his cordial relations with the West and the United States. As a state with average military power but weak economic capabilities, undemocratic rule and poor state-society relations, Egypt demonstrates a prime example of the satisfied static state – what Schweller calls a “*Lamb*” - that bandwagons for profit to keep its possessions and preserve the status-quo. Accordingly, the state is not willing to pay or take risks to expand its interests, and in fact would sometimes give away leverage to sustain and preserve the regime and its perceived status in the region. This became more evident during the last decade under Mubarak when other smaller states, like Qatar, started playing key regional roles.

Throughout his presidency, Mubarak remained distrustful of Iran’s rapprochement attempts and was convinced of the insincerity of Iran’s officials and the duality of Iran’s domestic apparatus as main challenges toward any normalization. While this could be true in some instances closer to home - like Iran’s support for the nascent Islamist regime in Sudan or funding Hamas and al-Jihad in Gaza - the Egyptian approach has always been rigid, with little room for negotiation. Security services believed that irrespective of Iran’s apparent intentions for cooperation and goodwill messages, Iranians are working to infiltrate Egypt to advance their revolutionary zeal across the region.¹⁵ Mubarak’s regime invested in and enjoyed strong relations with the Gulf monarchies, especially the Saudis, which provided much needed economic aid and investment for the populous Arab state. Egypt’s alliances did not stop with the Gulf but included strategic relations with the United States and the Europeans, which influenced the anti-Iran rhetoric at times. Egypt looked at its Western partners for military and economic aid, which when added to the Gulf support have kept Egypt’s economy afloat. In short, Egypt’s perception of Iran and its bandwagoning with the Gulf and the United States were far more important than normalizing relations and opening up to Iran.

The brief tenure of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood highlights the importance of a multiple level of analysis approach to foreign policy. Egypt’s foreign policy suffered

from competing internal narratives as well as regional changes. Despite the recognizable influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on Egypt’s political scene, their foreign policy was not part of a grand Islamist project or any project, for that matter. The expectations of a revolutionary foreign policy that would alter Egypt’s status-quo positions coupled with a fluid domestic and regional situation seemed idealistic. However, the Brotherhood looked at better relations with Hamas and Iran as two files that would distinguish them from the Mubarak regime. The exchange of visits by Morsi and Ahmadinejad in 2012 were historic as the first since Mubarak’s visit to Tehran as vice-president in 1978 and the Shah’s asylum in Cairo in 1980. These simple gestures were met with anxiety on the regional and domestic levels alike. Regionally, Morsi and the MB were quick to respond by assuring Egypt’s Gulf allies that any prospective relations with Iran would not detract from Cairo’s commitments to the security and stability of region as well as its obligations under the peace treaty with Israel. While internally, the Salafi Nour party - traditionally having close ties to Saudi Arabia and Egypt’s state security - organized protests and held conferences to warn against any normalization with Iran. They used sectarian rhetoric to galvanize Egyptians against Shiites and highlight Iranian support to the Syrian regime killing its Sunni citizens. The Salafists demanded a halt to the nascent Iranian tourism to Egypt initiative on fears of increasing Shiite influence and money that would alter Egypt’s Sunni culture and traditions

Morsi’s foreign policy symbolism might have given his supporters the impression that Egypt was moving toward a new path. However, nothing much changed and Egypt’s regional leadership aspirations by the Muslim Brotherhood were devoid of substance. The short-lived attempt at reorienting Egypt’s foreign policy seemed at odds with Egypt’s limited capabilities, which was struggling to stay solvent and adjusting to a new domestic political reality. Egypt was too dependent on financial assistance from the Gulf states, the United States, and the EU.¹⁶ Since the 2013 coup, President Abdelfattah el-Sisi has been focused on consolidating his grip on power and keeping Egypt solvent. This meant firmly returning to Mubarak’s approach of

solidifying Egypt's relations with the Gulf monarchies for economic gains and presenting Egypt as a pillar of regional status quo and security order by championing the fight against terrorism and curbing illegal immigration to Europe. While Sisi did much on the former – alienating and stifling the Egyptian society in the process – he did not join the aggressive anti-Iran bandwagon led by his Gulf allies, Israel and the United States. Egypt only continued its routine statements and lip-service decrying any Iranian intervention in the domestic affairs of the Arab states.

This stance poses the question of what is holding Cairo back from joining the regional offensive against Tehran. Is it the regime's focus on internal consolidation and legitimation? Is it a recognition of possible role for diplomacy on certain issues? Or simply sustaining the long tradition under Mubarak of normalized stagnation and use Iran as a card to extract benefits from its allies. If bandwagon for rewards is the name of the game, then Egypt's Sisi will continue on the path of lip-service against Iran.

Endnotes

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- ² Michiel Foulon. "Neoclassical Realism: Challengers and Bridging Identities," *International Studies Review*, 17 (2015), p. 635-661
- ³ Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik. "Is anybody still a Realist?" *International Security*, Vol. 24, n. 2, (Fall 1999), pp. 5-55.
- ⁴ Foulon. *Ibid.*, p. 635
- ⁵ Foulon. *Ibid.*, p. 636
- ⁶ Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security*, 29.2 (2004), pp. 164
- ⁷ Randall Schweller. "Bandwagoning For Profit: Bringing The Revisionist State Back in," *International Security*, 19.1 (1994), p. 79. For Stephen Walt's definition of Bandwagoning, see Stephen Walt. "Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia," *International Security*, 42.2 (1988), p. 282.
- ⁸ Randall Schweller. "Bandwagoning For Profit: Bringing The Revisionist State Back in," *International Security*, 19.1 (1994), p. 106
- ⁹ Schweller. *Ibid.*, pp. 95
- ¹⁰ Schweller. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97
- ¹¹ Schweller. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99
- ¹² Marc Lynch. "Regional International Relations," in Ellen Lust, ed. *The Middle East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 315
- ¹³ Shahram Chubin and Sepeh Zabih. *The Foreign Relations of Iran: A Developing State in a Zone of Great-Power Conflict*. University of California Press, 1974, p. 141
- ¹⁴ As part of their anti-communist policy, Egypt and Iran were members of an intelligence service alliance - Safari Club - along with Morocco, Saudi Arabi and France to fight communism in Africa. See, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal. *Iran: The Untold Story*. Pantheon Books, New York, 1982, p. 113
- ¹⁵ Ahmed Abu el Gheit. *Shehadaty: al-Seyasa al-Kharejya al-Masrya 2004-2011 – [My Testimony: Egyptian Foreign Policy 2004-2011]*. Cairo: Nahdet Misr Publishing, 2013, p. 387
- ¹⁶ Nael Shama. *Egyptian Foreign Policy from Mubarak to Morsi: Against the National Interest*. London: Routledge, 2013

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