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This issue of Strategic Assessment, a collaborative effort by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, is an expanded special issue that aims to examine and analyze what is known as the “Arab Spring” from the perspective of a decade. The upheaval that began in Tunisia in late 2010 and spread throughout the Arab world has not yet ended. Its shockwaves continue to have an impact on a region marked by chronic instability, with Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Lebanon leading examples of battered states resting on tottering political, economic, and social foundations. This instability threatens effective internal sovereignty and accelerates state failure, challenging not only the individual countries but regional security at large. Dynamics in the region also continue to affect the international arena.

Given that the decade since the Arab upheaval can be described and studied from different perspectives with a variety of methodologies, we as editors were faced with challenging questions on how to approach the issue. On the one hand, it was important for us to analyze thoroughly key countries in the region, and to provide a comprehensive picture of the processes and trends underway in individual states. On the other hand, it was also important for us to present an overall regional perspective, assessing changes in the regional architecture and comparing events and processes across the various countries. In addition, we sought to map trends in the regional system, and to address Israel’s position in the region during and after the upheaval. Early on, doubts arose as to the very existence of a regional system according to familiar meanings that were formerly regular mainstays of our research. Another dilemma involved the balance between the ontological discussion, i.e., describing and analyzing the regional situation that has emerged in the past decade, and the epistemological debate surrounding the way we view and perceive the changes that have occurred in the region from a theoretical and methodological standpoint.

In tackling these and other conceptual challenges, we engaged in several thoughtful, searching discussions, which led to interesting observations and insights. It was clear to us that any choice about how to organize this special issue would limit certain topics, insofar as its scope covers a decade, many countries, a range of processes, and numerous actors. Aiming at a comprehensive compilation that would be relevant in the long term, we decided on five thematic sections, each represented by articles relating to core issues and phenomena, with the goal of examining countries and seminal events as landmarks or test cases for the broader conceptualizations and analyses.

The first theme concerns the regional architecture—the structure and characteristics of the regional system. The second deals with the status of political ideas and ideologies in the region. The third addresses public opinion in the Middle East, which has emerged as an element setting in motion significant political processes in the region. The fourth offers a demographic and economic perspective of the Middle East. The fifth examines the intersection of the regional and international arenas.

We adapted the sections of the regular periodical to the special issue. In the book review section, we chose to critique books that discuss broad topics concerning the general regional order; so too with the academic survey of research about the regional upheaval published during the past decade. We devoted the professional symposium to a meeting of scholars and experts to discuss the significance and consequences for Israel of the regional upheaval. In this framework,
we tried to understand Israel's position in the regional order during the upheaval and thereafter, and to highlight the opportunities and challenges for Israel from the perspective of a decade.

We chose to end the issue with an epilogue by Prof. Shlomo Avineri, a renowned professor of political science and one of the leading scholars in Israel and worldwide in the field. In his article, Prof. Avineri presents a unique analysis with a broad perspective that incorporates his insights at the level of the international order, the regional order, and the implications for Israel.

We devoted several months to this special issue, and many partners in the effort deserve our gratitude. Heartfelt thanks go to Dr. Sarah Feuer, who participated in the project as a guest editor and devoted herself to the task with exceptional dedication and diligence. We also thank the scholars at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University, and especially the director of research, Dr. Brandon Friedman, for their cooperation and contributions to the issue.

We wish to thank INSS Deputy Director Brig. Gen. (ret.) Itai Brun for his encouragement and excellent advice, and for moderating the fruitful symposium. Special and heartfelt thanks are due to the dedicated language editors: Dr. Judith Rosen, associate editor of the periodical, whose professionalism and diligence helped us produce the English-language version of the issue, and Hebrew editor Mira Yallin, who helped us bring the issue to the finish line with efficiency and dedication, despite the exceptional number of articles and the short timetable.

We hope you find the issue engaging and thought-provoking.

Kobi Michael and Carmit Valensi, Editors, Strategic Assessment
Sarah Feuer, Guest Editor
In Search of a Regional Order: The Struggle over the Shape of the Middle East

Itai Brun and Sarah Feuer

This article describes the regional architecture of the Middle East today using a systemic approach and employing terms like “regional order” in the sense of a dynamic structure rather than an organized, static arrangement. The central argument is that the defining feature of the regional order in the last decade has been a growing struggle over the shape of the Middle East, playing out on two levels: a clash between competing camps seeking to shape the contours and dominant features of the broader regional order, and a confrontation within the individual states between publics and governing elites (including, in some cases, militaries) over core economic, governance, and identity-related issues. The primary benefit of employing this epistemological and ontological approach is that it envisions the region as “whole” and thus permits a better understanding of the political behavior of its component parts, ultimately providing useful insights for policymakers.

Keywords: regional order, Arab Spring, Middle East, Iran
Introduction
Ten years after a series of uprisings swept the Middle East and North Africa, there is general agreement that the so-called Arab Spring and its aftermath severely disrupted, if not altogether overturned, a decades-long order characterizing the Middle East. Still, consensus remains elusive on precisely what has come in its place. Is it possible to discern a new Middle East order today? And if so, how does it differ from the order it presumably replaced? This article describes and analyzes the regional architecture of the contemporary Middle East, using a systemic approach to account for the complexities therein.

We use terms such as “regional order,” “regional architecture,” and “regional system” interchangeably, in the sense of a dynamic structure rather than an organized, static arrangement. This order comprises “camps,” “axes,” or “blocs” of states and non-state actors that feature complex, dynamic associations both between and within them, including struggles and conflicts. The regional order we describe also comprises internal clashes within the states between leaders and their publics, stemming largely from pervasive longstanding fundamental problems in the region. In many ways the region seems to be branded by disorder rather than order. Still, without the conceptual framework we propose, the disorder would simply appear as chaos and preclude any understanding of key processes and developments in the region. The primary benefit of using this epistemological and ontological approach, therefore, is that it envisions the region as “whole” and thus permits a better understanding of the political behavior of its component parts, ultimately providing useful insights, including for policymakers.

Our central argument is that the defining feature of the regional order in the last decade has been a struggle over the shape of the Middle East, playing out on two levels: a battle between competing camps seeking to shape the contours and dominant features of the broader regional order, and a conflict within the individual states between publics and governing elites (including, in some cases, militaries) over core economic, governance, and identity-related issues.

The roots of the current regional order, from the emergence of some of the camps to the region’s endemic economic and governance-related problems, pre-date the uprisings of 2011. Moreover, the upheaval of the last decade did not represent the first instance of mass protests in the region, and it was not the first time the old regional order came under threat. From the late 1960s onward, the regional order comprised states governed by strong, powerful leaders backed by militaries or other security apparatuses and capable of fending off threats to ensure basically smooth succession processes, occasional (and rarely free) elections, and a notion of citizens more akin to subjects of the regimes. The old regional architecture was one in which nation states were the dominant actors (as opposed to non-state entities or camps), trans-national ideas like pan-Arabism were weak (especially after Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six Day War), and the regional agenda was largely dictated by the core Arab states of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.

From the late 1970s through the early years of the new millennium, this old order faced numerous challenges, beginning with the Iranian revolution of 1979, which both propelled the country onto a regional scene that until then was dominated by Arab states, and planted the seeds of a Sunni-Shia divide that would become a significant driver of developments thereafter (although the ongoing importance of the sectarian element in regional developments notwithstanding, the Sunni-Shia framework remains inadequate as a tool for understanding the broader regional order). Ensuing challenges
included Israel’s peace agreement with Egypt (which in many ways removed the latter from the core Arab bloc), the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, the emergence of jihadists during the Soviet-Afghan war, Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing United States military operation in 1990-1991, the wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), which brought a more entrenched American presence to the region, and the removal of Saddam by the US—the first such instance in modern history of an outside military force bringing down an Arab leader in the Middle East.

What distinguished 2011 from these earlier challenges was the precedent-setting mass protests resulting in the ouster of leaders. Since then, events of the last decade have only sharpened the divisions between rival groups vying for regional hegemony and exacerbated the confrontation between publics and their leaderships, producing the struggle we describe as the principal feature of today’s regional order.

We are aware that references to the Middle East as a “regional system” tend to disturb some scholars. Part of the discomfort stems from disciplinary differences; historians and area studies scholars may be less convinced by allusions to a regional system than their colleagues in the social sciences, for whom systemic approaches have been prevalent for decades in sub-fields like international relations. Some take issue with the notion that there is a cohesive “region” at all, given the diverse conditions across such a vast expanse of territory; for these skeptics, it makes more sense to talk about sub-regions like the Eastern Mediterranean or the Maghreb or the Gulf, rather than lump all three into one broad unit. While sub-regional blocs have certainly emerged, our contention is that the shared history (both real and imagined), combined with the linguistic, cultural, and religious linkages between populations in these countries, renders the greater Middle East more of an organic region rather than simply a collection of states in geographic proximity to one another (Erlich, 2003).

For others still, uneasiness about the idea of a “regional order” or a “regional architecture” stems from the assumption that the presumed order implies that developments therein must always be connected or unfold according to a single, unifying, internal logic. If anything, some have argued, the events of the last decade only reinforce the notion that the dominant feature of the Middle East today is not any kind of order but rather disorder, fragmentation, and chaos (Lynch, 2016). Our conceptualization of the regional “order” or “architecture” is not meant to suggest an inherent structure to the Middle East in the sense of an organized, institutional arrangement. Nor do we presume a uniformity of experience among the respective state populations, or even a fixed set of rules governing the behavior of the states in the region. On the contrary, in many cases the interactions, linkages, complex relationships, and contradictions between states, non-state entities, leaders, populations, and other actors of the region are messy, conflictual, and prone to change as circumstances dictate. Rather, we use these terms to refer to the patterns of relationships and interactions between states of the Middle East and North Africa, i.e., the layer of analysis residing above the individual states but below the international system.

What distinguished 2011 from these earlier challenges was the precedent-setting mass protests resulting in the ouster of leaders.

As Robert Jervis noted, “We are dealing with a system when (a) a set of units or elements is interconnected so that changes in some elements or their relations produce changes in other parts of the system, and (b) the entire system exhibits properties and behaviors that are different from those of the parts” (Jervis, 1997). The analytical usefulness of a systemic approach is apparent when we consider the uprisings of 2011. It would be possible to describe the discrete events of 2011 simply
by referring to developments in the individual states, and perhaps occasionally linking those developments to dynamics at the international level, such as the Occupy Wall Street protests in the United States. But since the defining characteristic of the upheaval was its sweep across the region, without a systemic approach focused on the level between the state and the international arena, we would have difficulty explaining why the self-immolation of a young man in a small Tunisian town proved to impact on the entire region. Similarly, when it comes to analyzing the events of the past decade and assessing the defining features of the region today—from the emergence of ISIS/Islamic State, to the rise of new leaderships, to the second wave of protests in 2019, to the recent normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states—a systemic approach offers the most useful analytical framework.

To the extent that scholars have sought to explain outcomes in the Middle East using such an approach, their works have generally fallen into four categories: studies testing out international relations theory (such as neo-realist assumptions about the anarchic nature of the international system, or constructivist approaches emphasizing the role of ideas and ideology) on Middle East cases (Binder, 1958; Walt, 1987; Rubin, 2014); a strand of scholarship explaining events in the Middle East with reference to developments in the international system (Barnett, 1998; Said Aly et al., 2013); a literature exploring the post-Cold War growth in regional institutions around the world, including in the Middle East (Hurrell, 1995; Fawcett & Hurrell, 1995); and works outlining the features of a Middle East regional system and explaining changes therein (Gause, 1999; Hinnebusch, 2013; Krasna, 2019).

We build on the latter category, including the efforts of scholars such as F. Gregory Gause III and Raymond Hinnebusch to define the Middle East regional system with reference to its anarchic nature, its multipolar distribution of power among the states, the evolving relationship between state and society, and the tensions between state sovereignty and transnational identities that have long characterized the region (Gause, 1999; Hinnebusch, 2013). Our conceptualization of the struggle constituting the regional system today incorporates elements from their work. The model of competing camps vying for regional hegemony, for example, presumes an inherently anarchic structure and an increasingly multipolar landscape, while the ongoing confrontation between governing elites (whether civilian or military) and their publics stems from longstanding economic challenges, identity-related conflicts, and evolving state-society relations more generally, all of which feature prominently in the works of these scholars.

Still, our thesis departs from previous analyses in several respects. Since Malcolm Kerr’s classic study asserting an “Arab Cold War,” a sizable literature has emerged on the evolving power struggles and rivalries between regional blocs and individual states of the Middle East over the years. But our central contention—that the regional system today is characterized by an overarching struggle, comprising both an ongoing battle between clusters of actors and a confrontation between governments and publics within the states—is novel, as far as we know. And since we argue that this struggle forms the core dynamic of the regional order, the borders we delineate are more inclusive, because the states implicated in that broader struggle extend from Morocco to Iran and from Turkey to Yemen. It is our hope that such a conceptualization contributes to the ongoing scholarly and policy debates surrounding the current Middle East. In the sections that follow, we briefly recap the key developments of the last decade, examine the two main realms of the ongoing struggle over the shape of the region, and conclude with some reflections
on alternative approaches to understanding the regional system today.

A Decade of Unrest

The mass mobilization of Arab publics in 2011 and the subsequent departure of rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen represented a profound break from the historical norm of a region that until then had appeared largely (though not entirely) immune to the kind of social unrest and popular upheaval capable of overturning regimes. The basic chronology is by now well known. Most assessments point to the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in December of 2010 and the ensuing protests in the small North African country as the proximate trigger of what ultimately morphed into a region-wide surge of unrest. Bouazizi’s economic distress, coupled with the abuse he suffered at the hands of corrupt police officers, unleashed a wave of demonstrations that succeeded in ousting Tunisia’s longtime autocratic President, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. The remainder of 2011 saw similarly inspired mass demonstrations across the region calling for political liberalization, jobs, and an end to corruption. By early 2012, four Arab rulers in power for decades had been ousted.

In their place, movements and political parties linked to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) began capitalizing on their longstanding grassroots presence and organizational superiority to ascend to power in key capitals across the region. While Islamist electoral victories in places like Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco hinted at a new emerging order, the inability of these parties to build broad-based coalitions and provide compelling solutions to the region’s ills ultimately elicited a backlash against political Islam that in many respects continues to this day. The coup in Egypt that toppled Mohamed Morsi in 2013 and brought the military general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi into the presidential palace would prove emblematic of the MB’s demise in the years to follow.

As the MB struggled to retain its relevance, a more radical variant of Sunni Islamism emerged in 2014 in the form of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which distinguished itself from al-Qaeda and demanded the restoration of an Islamic caliphate. By mid-2015 the jihadist organization had captured a substantial swath of territory extending from Syria’s northwestern border with Turkey as far east as Mosul and Fallujah in Iraq. In part due to the stunning success of ISIS, the years 2015 and 2016 came to be marked by growing international involvement in the region, reflected most prominently in Russia’s intervention in the Syrian war and the US-led military coalition aimed at beating back and containing IS’s spread. Both endeavors succeeded insofar as Bashar al-Assad, while failing to reassert control over all of Syrian territory, nonetheless retained his position thanks to Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah assistance, and ISIS’s territorial gains were largely reversed by late 2018.

With the threat of ISIS all but removed, populations could shift their focus once again to the endemic problems confronting them closer to home, and the result was a new round of protests across the region, this time originating in Sudan and Algeria, and extending to Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt (albeit on a smaller scale), and even Iran. The “second wave” of 2019 managed to unseat long-serving autocrats in Algiers and Khartoum, and ultimately brought down prime ministers in Baghdad and Beirut, while destabilizing Tehran. The COVID-19 crisis of 2020 suspended many of the region’s protests, providing a respite for regimes struggling to contain popular opposition. But the core economic, social, and governance-related problems propelling Tunisians into the streets after Bouazizi’s death a decade ago have remained in place or worsened, suggesting that whatever relative calm the pandemic may have imposed on the region will likely prove temporary.

The final significant development of the decade was the series of normalization agreements reached between Israel and the
United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, respectively, in 2020. Beyond the proximate triggers fueling these agreements—the specter of Israel’s annexation of territory in the West Bank, combined with these countries’ wish to extract as much as possible from an outgoing Trump administration—the growing ties between Israel and these Arab states reflect key elements of the broader struggle fueling the regional system in the last decade.

Three clarifications about the camps are in order. First, the notion of a “camp” reflects both an ontological reality and an epistemological argument. The connections between, and dynamics within, the groupings we identify as “camps” actually exist, so from this standpoint we are not inventing anything. The downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the rise of President Sisi in 2013 prompted the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait to inject billions of dollars into Cairo’s Central Bank. In 2017, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi led a GCC-wide boycott of Qatar, partly due to the latter’s support of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qasem Soleimani, prior to his assassination in early January 2020, was the commander of Iran’s IRGC Quds Force, the organization responsible for translating Iran’s regional policy into operations on the ground. As such, he was a frequent visitor in Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad, where he synchronized and coordinated the activities of axis members and proxies, including Hezbollah, Bashar al-Assad, Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis. In late 2019, the Turkish foreign minister and the Prime Minister of the internationally recognized Libyan government met in Doha, and six months later the Turkish and Qatari defense ministers visited Tripoli. These examples speak to the ontological basis for the groups we have identified.

At the same time, the actors within these camps do not usually refer to themselves as such—though in some cases they do, as when Hezbollah speaks of “the resistance axis” or when elites in the UAE refer to the Sunni pragmatic states and Israel as a “bloc of progress and development.” In this respect, the “camps” reflect an epistemological tool that both decision makers and analysts can approach as an analytical framework to help make sense of developments in the region.

Second, the classification of these camps is not meant to suggest that their competing visions of a regional order constitute the only, or even in some cases the primary, factor motivating their actions. Middle East leaders,
like leaders everywhere, are primarily motivated by their self-interest, and considerations of realpolitik always accompany ideological preferences in the formulation of policy. The competing visions of a Middle East order reflected in the respective camps help to explain the logic governing actors’ determinations of both what constitutes and what will best serve those interests. Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan intervenes in Libya’s civil war partly to secure economic gains and extend Turkish influence across the Mediterranean, but his choice of which side to back in seeking those gains also reflects his preference for Islamists partial to the MB. The model of the camps helps to account for such developments.

Third, the competing camps are not only distinct from one another; they also differ in kind. One camp is a consortium comprising a regional power, several non-state organizations, and a state, organized in a relatively coherent fashion akin to a board of directors. A second camp blends an ideology, several states, and various political parties dotting the regional landscape. A third camp does not consist of states but rather a group of organizations linked by ideology but hostile to each other and sometimes diverging in their visions. And a fourth camp is a group of states sharing a broadly pro-Western orientation but otherwise united primarily by the states and ideologies they collectively oppose. The different nature of each grouping helps to account for their distinct approaches in seeking to shape the regional order.

The first camp, which we refer to as the “Iran-led axis”—and which is sometimes referred to by its own members as “the resistance axis” and by others as “the radical Shiite axis”—comprises Iran and its mostly Shiite allies and proxies across the region, including various militias in Iraq, Bashar al-Assad’s Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Houthis in Yemen can also be included in this grouping, as can Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Gaza, despite the latter’s Sunni identity. This camp, whose roots stretch back to the Iranian revolution in 1979, is anti-Western in its orientation, revisionist insofar as it is not wedded to the sanctity of state borders across the region, and relatively aggressive in deploying military tools to achieve its aims.

The last decade has been alternately kind and frustrating to the Iran-led axis. Tehran initially misread the events of 2011, calculating that mass numbers of citizens taking to the streets across the region would serve its interests in undermining conservative Arab regimes and providing an opening for the ascendance of Islamist (albeit Sunni) popular movements. But when those protests began to implicate Assad in Syria, Iran felt itself under attack, insofar as Assad’s downfall would have threatened to fell the entire camp. Iran, along with its partners in Hezbollah and various additional Shiite militias, took upon itself the task of saving Bashar’s regime, and when it succeeded in doing so, began to entrench itself further in Syria. This deepening Iranian entrenchment in turn prompted Israel to launch a military campaign aimed at preventing any such permanent outcome. Indeed, Israel’s emergence as a major regional power in the last decades has constituted a serious challenge to the Iran-led axis; more recently, the camp has had to contend with Soleimani’s killing, the COVID-19 crisis, the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign, and the fatal attack on Iran’s chief nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, in 2020. And yet, Iran’s regional footprint remains quite intact, bolstered all the more so by the defeat of ISIS and the opening that enabled Tehran to extend its influence deeper into Iraq. Bashar has held onto Syria (fragmented though it may be), and Hezbollah, while facing serious challenges, nonetheless remains the leading political force in Lebanon today. Among the four camps described here, the Iran-led axis is the most cohesive, although it appears the camp is struggling to find a replacement for Soleimani equally capable of synchronizing the activities of Iran’s proxies throughout the region.
The second camp comprises the Sunni states, movements, and political parties connected by their shared sympathy for the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood. The MB and its ideology have existed since the 1920s, and in certain places—such as Turkey in 2002 or Gaza in 2006—derivative movements moved into positions of political power before the onset of the upheaval. But 2011 provided MB sympathizers an opportunity to transform themselves from an assortment of mostly banned or moderately tolerated opposition groups into formidable actors exercising state power. The election of Mohamed Morsi, head of Egypt’s Freedom and Justice Party, to the presidency in 2012 embodied this rise, but the Brotherhood’s time in power was ultimately cut short following the counter-coup in 2013. Morsi’s arrest and the Sisi regime’s broader crackdown on elements of the Brotherhood had severe repercussions for Brotherhood affiliates across the region, even as the movement’s mantra that “Islam is the solution” continues to garner support in the Middle East.

The camp today is led by Turkey and includes the regime in Qatar, Hamas in Gaza, and the handful of Islamist political parties across the region, such as Tunisia’s Ennahda party, Jordan’s Islamic Action Front, and Kuwait’s Islamic Constitutional Movement. Common ideology notwithstanding, promotion of political Islam is not the only or in some cases even the dominant rationale motivating the behavior of these actors; rather, support for the MB remains a part of their self-legitimating strategies and helps to explain their regional alliances.

The deterioration of talks aimed at facilitating Turkey’s accession to the European Union gave Erdogan additional incentive to shift his focus eastward, and in seeking to extend Turkish influence across the Middle East, he has increasingly burnished his Islamist credentials. The ideas and proponents of the MB continue to be perceived warily by the Iran-led camp and as a major threat by the Sunni pragmatic camp. The latter’s disdain for political Islam was apparent in the recent decision by the post-Bashir government in Sudan to revoke the citizenships of Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal and the head of Tunisia’s Ennahda party, Rached Ghannouchi.

A third camp comprises the remnants of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and affiliated jihadist movements across the region that, though connected by a shared ideology, are often hostile to each another and differ in their visions and tactics. In contrast to the three other groupings described here, the jihadist camp did not exist as such prior to 2011, and even today its designation as a “camp” reflects an analytical distinction rather than any self-identification or observable cooperation between the component groups. Until then, the leading jihadist organization, al-Qaeda, had generally promoted three narratives: the predominant, global narrative, advanced by Osama bin Laden and focused on undermining Western regimes (for example, September 11, 2001); a regional narrative reflected in the works of Ayman al-Zawahiri, prioritizing defeat of “the near enemy” among Middle East regimes the group deemed kufar (infidels); and an initial Palestinian version represented by Abdullah Azzam but ultimately marginalized after he was killed in 1989. With bin Laden’s death at the hands of American special forces in 2011, Zawahiri’s assumption of leadership over the organization brought the regional story to greater prominence, and the power vacuums created by the upheaval that year (especially in places like the Sinai Peninsula and Syria) brought widely dispersed jihadist forces to the region and ultimately provided an opening for a new, regionally oriented jihadist organization—ISIS (Daesh). Organizational rivalries and deep disagreements over whether to prioritize establishment of an Islamic state eventually undermined the cohesiveness of this camp, and ISIS and others have continued to perceive each other as threats rather than allies, despite the groups’ shared ideological commitments to an anti-Western, revisionist, and deeply sectarian
regional order. More recently, the camp has suffered a number of powerful blows, chief among them the territorial defeat of ISIS and the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019. Still, pockets of the camp continue to operate across the region, and Salafi-jihadist ideas remain very much in circulation.

The last camp is perhaps the least cohesive of the four, consisting of the Sunni Arab states that have coalesced—in rhetoric and intention, if not always in practice—around the goals of countering Iranian influence across the Middle East, diminishing the sway of the MB and derivative Islamist movements that were on the rise after 2011, and countering jihadist extremism. These countries are usually referred to as “moderate” or “pragmatic” because of their generally positive ties to the West, their belief in the primacy of sovereign nation states over any transnational entity or identity, and their relative openness to Israel’s presence in the neighborhood. Of all the camps, this was ostensibly the most comfortable with the pre-2011 order, and thus it experienced the upheaval, especially the emergence of publics as politically salient actors, as a trauma. Perhaps because the last decade has fundamentally undermined an order that by and large served them well, leaders in this camp—which today includes Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, and Morocco—have tended to articulate their interests less in terms of what they seek to promote and more in terms of what they oppose, e.g., extremism, instability, Iranian expansionism, and political Islam.

Additionally, the very pragmatism of this camp has meant that the states therein tend to form ad hoc alliances based on immediate threat perceptions and available capabilities rather than longer-term strategic goals and shared geopolitical orientations when making foreign policy decisions. And although they share a desire to contain the twin threats of Iranian expansionism and MB-style Islamism, they differ in their prioritization of these challenges. For example, whereas Morocco initially sent troops to support the Saudi-UAE campaign in Yemen, the kingdom on the western edge of the Arab world also took a neutral stance in the rift between Qatar and its Gulf rivals to avoid antagonizing its patrons in Doha. In contrast to Saudi Arabia, Egypt prioritizes the fight against the MB over the containment of Iran; hence Cairo’s decision in 2019 to pull out of the anti-Iranian “Arab NATO” initiative. Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed is less keen than his protégé in Riyadh, Mohammed bin Salman, to antagonize Tehran, which helps to explain the UAE’s decision to withdraw from the Saudi-UAE military alliance in Yemen (despite the fact that both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh view a Houthi ascendance there as a Trojan horse for Iranian influence) and the more recent Emirati rhetoric singling out Turkey as a threat of equal, if not greater, magnitude as Iran. The result of such developments is that the Sunni pragmatic camp has had difficulty both countering Iran and snuffing out the remaining embers of political Islam.

What began in Syria as a series of domestic protests in 2011 morphed into a civil war in which nearly every major regional and international actor became involved at one time or another.

The struggle between the camps described above has been reflected in numerous developments on the ground in countries across the region. Perhaps the most glaring example has been Syria, where what began as a series of domestic protests in 2011 morphed into a civil war in which nearly every major regional and international actor at one time or another became involved. In this sense, the Syrian theater became “Exhibit A” of the broader struggle over a regional order, with the Iranian-led camp (bolstered by Russian assistance) resisting jihadists and MB elements to preserve Assad’s position; rebel groups briefly receiving support from the Sunni pragmatic camp; and Turkey establishing a zone of control along
the border between the two countries. But the battle between the regional camps was also evident elsewhere. Consider Libya, where members of the pragmatic camp (principally Egypt and the UAE) have been pitted against representatives of the MB camp (Turkey and, in the background, Qatar) as both seek to mold the emerging Libyan order in a way that advances their interests, and where the jihadist camp also briefly appeared ascendant throughout 2015-2016, when IS commanded its largest province there outside the central territory of Iraq and Syria. In Yemen, the Iranian axis has lent at least indirect support to the Houthis in their struggle against groups allied with the Sunni pragmatic camp, while jihadists affiliated with al-Qaeda remain a severe threat. And in Iraq, where the Iranian camp has leveraged its role in beating back the IS jihadists to extend its own influence in the political realm, Saudi Arabia and others in the pragmatic camp have recently re-established a diplomatic presence in Baghdad, presumably in part to undermine Iran’s ambitions there.

The rivalry between the camps has also been reflected in emerging blocs of alliances across the region. One glaring example in recent years has been in the Eastern Mediterranean, where what began as a local scramble for access to natural gas and a dispute over maritime borders morphed into an increasingly hostile confrontation between Turkey (and, in the background, Qatar) on one side and an alliance between Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and the UAE on the other. Originally, the tensions between countries along the Eastern Mediterranean basin were locally driven, but over time both Erdogan’s growing assertiveness and the UAE’s subsequent desire to check Turkish (read: MB) ambitions have increasingly implicated the Eastern Mediterranean in the broader struggle for influence between various Middle East camps.

A final point concerns where Israel and the Palestinians figure among the camps. In the last decade, Israel has solidified its standing as an ally of the Sunni pragmatic camp, evidenced by its military campaign to frustrate Iran’s entrenchment in Syria, its quiet military assistance to Egypt in Sinai, and its widely presumed, if until now largely covert, security cooperation with the various Gulf states that share the perception of a threat emanating from Tehran. The recent normalization (peace) agreements between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco exemplified the trend. And while it is too early to assess the success of the agreements, it is reasonable to assume that to the extent that normalization strengthens the pragmatic Sunni/Israeli camp, it will likely deepen regional divisions between the pragmatists and the Islamists on the one hand, and between the pragmatic and Iran-led camps on the other.

For their part, the Palestinians, much like their governments, have been split in their regional alignment. Since 2011, Hamas has developed a clearer regional position within the Sunni Islamist bloc (having previously been more closely associated with the Iranian-led axis), and thus the organization has enjoyed a greater degree of regional sponsorship from Qatar and Turkey, even as it occasionally continues to flirt with Iran. The Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, by contrast, cannot really claim to belong to any camp today, reflecting a certain failure on Ramallah’s part to devise a regional strategy that might have positioned it more advantageously vis-à-vis Israel. However, the PA finds itself increasingly isolated, notwithstanding occasional statements of support by Arab leaders and ongoing public sympathy across the region for the Palestinian cause. Whereas much of the vitality of the Palestinian cause traditionally came from the region, the shifting fault lines over the past decade—and especially what is perceived as the reduced urgency of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—have left the Palestinians under the PA without a clear regional stance, and thus at a significant disadvantage.
The Conflict within the States

The second locus of the broader struggle is within the states. There, regimes—particularly political leaders, elites, and the militaries or other security apparatuses that continue to be bastions for their survival—are confronting frustrated, disillusioned publics and striving to contain domestic instability arising from endemic economic and social problems. These include unemployment, corruption, inequality, and an over-reliance on hydrocarbon sales or foreign aid, as well as identity-related pressures in the form of tribal clashes, sectarian schisms, and the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities.

Moreover, by the time the uprisings erupted in 2011, the traditional social contract prevalent throughout the region—whereby the state provided citizens with jobs, education, and security, extracted relatively little in the way of taxes, but also protected and often gave preferential treatment to business elites and the security sector—had been gradually dissipating over the course of several decades, due to the convergence of demographic trends and deficiencies in governance. Already by the early 2000s, for example, the Middle East’s younger population and the percentage of those youth who were unemployed were among the highest in the world; both turned out to be key drivers of the unrest in late 2010-early 2011 (Kabbani, 2019).

In the ensuing decade, slowed economic growth—whether due to instability, war, or the breakdown of basic state institutions—sent unemployment levels even higher, such that on the eve of the COVID-19 outbreak, two-thirds of the region’s population was under the age of 35 and youth unemployment stood at 25 percent (World Bank, 2020). Poverty also increased markedly during this period (even in oil-producing states where the cushion of hydrocarbon revenues should have presumably mitigated this eventuality), and the region continues to boast the highest levels of income inequality in the world. In Yemen, Libya, and Syria, the combination of such prevalent problems and war have led them to become failed states. Beyond the economic realm, the decade saw an eruption of longstanding identity-related tensions, including new expressions of the Sunni-Shiite schism, as in the battles between the Islamic State and pro-Iranian Shiite militias; the persecution of minorities, as in the massacre of the Yazidis in 2014; and tribal clashes, featuring prominently, for example, in the Libyan war. Thus while the economic problems and identity-related points of contention were long in the making by 2011, the uprisings fundamentally upset the internal order of these states by introducing the element of mobilized publics as key political actors into the equation.

The second wave of protests throughout 2019 suggests that the region’s publics for the most part were undeterred from taking to the streets against the backdrop of ongoing problems that have remained in place, if not worsened. Even Tunisia, the region’s lone (relative) success story of the past decade, has seen growing unrest in recent years as successive governments appear unable to tackle the deep structural problems that fueled the original 2010-2011 protests. And in countries where the post-2011 regimes have managed to suppress additional protests, leaders and governments know they face a persistent threat of galvanized publics demanding their ouster. In this regard, the onset of the coronavirus crisis in early 2020 created a paradox. On the one hand, fear of contagion forced protesters to stay home, thereby offering regimes a measure
of relief, a chance to consolidate their power, and an opportunity to prepare (and perhaps even preempt) future bouts of unrest. On the other hand, to the extent the economic impact of the virus exacerbated the region’s core problems that fomented opposition to regimes and undermined stability in the first place, the pandemic has likely increased the chances of future unrest.

Algeria illustrates this paradox nicely. There, a year-long protest movement managed to bring down the presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April 2019 but was forced to suspend its demonstrations when COVID struck, offering Bouteflika’s successor a chance to consolidate his power even as the public largely continues to view him as illegitimate. But if the pandemic enabled the regime of Abdelmejjid Tebboune to chase high-profile protest leaders and other perceived threats in civil society, it also sped up the economic deterioration Algeria faced prior to the pandemic, thereby making it more likely that Tebboune’s government will confront the prospect of a failing state even sooner.

The heightened degree to which leaders today are preoccupied with domestic sources of opposition explains both why they have resorted to higher levels of political repression at home, and why they have pursued interventions abroad, partly to prevent outside actors from mobilizing like-minded movements within their borders, and in some instances to divert domestic discontent to international issues. Consider, for example, Turkey’s military intervention in Syria and Ankara’s determination to carve out a territory under its control along the northern Syrian border, aimed in part at preventing the establishment of a contiguous Kurdish enclave to its south, which could inspire secessionist tendencies among Turkey’s own Kurdish population. Or take Egypt’s intervention in Libya, which aims partly to prevent instability there from spilling over into its territory and partly to prevent Libyan actors sympathetic to the MB from emerging in a dominant position. From Cairo’s perspective, such an outcome could potentially embolden like-minded Islamists in Egypt, where the regime has cracked down severely on nearly all forms of protest and political activity.

**Points of Contact**

Although the two levels of the regional struggle generally exist separate from one another, there is a key dynamic linking the clashes within the states to the battle between the competing camps. The heightened sense of insecurity among leaders, stemming in part from domestic opposition, has increased their tendency to intervene in areas beyond their borders, undermining the sovereignty of states and in many cases further fueling the conflict between rival camps (Lynch, 2018). Thus even if states in the region have largely retained their borders (defying earlier predictions of “an end to Sykes-Picot,” the 1916 agreement between Britain and France delineating state borders across the Middle East), the sovereignty many regimes are able to exercise is limited. For a number of regimes across the region, sovereignty is constrained, in the sense of geographically limited, and contested, insofar as leaders face continuous domestic and external challengers (Sayigh, 2018; Valensi & Michael, 2021).

Consider the case of Egypt, where widespread public dissatisfaction with Mohamed Morsi’s governance ultimately led a million citizens into the streets of Cairo in July 2013 demanding his ouster, prompting the army and allied factions to carry it out. It is doubtful Abdel Fattah el-Sisi would have survived as Morsi’s successor absent the financial assistance he received over the next eighteen months from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, all of which saw a Sisi presidency as a means of checking the MB’s rise across the region. Or take the example of Sudan, where in 2017 Islamist political elites convinced their longtime President, Omar al-Bashir, to maintain relations with Qatar even after the Gulf rift exploded that summer. The move antagonized Bashir’s patrons in the UAE, who had demanded he reduce the influence of
Islamists at home and consequently went on to abandon him in the face of mass protests calling for his ouster two years later, effectively facilitating his overthrow.

For their part, the protesters in Iraq and Lebanon throughout 2019 understood well that Iranian encroachment in their domestic affairs had become directly entangled with, and to some extent responsible for, the political dysfunction undermining good governance and the provision of basic services. Indeed, in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, foreign-backed security forces vie with remnants of regular armed forces and sub-state paramilitary units for control over territory, leaving governments struggling to assert full sovereignty over their countries and further undermining their ability to address the myriad economic and social problems facing these societies.

Where Are We? Alternative Approaches to Understanding the Regional System

In this concluding discussion, we return to the original question we posed, namely: what has replaced the pre-2011 order? In the evolving discourse on the post-Spring landscape, three general approaches to understanding the Middle East have emerged. The first posits that the regional system has settled into a new, relatively stable order, which is fundamentally different from the one it replaced in 2011. A second approach contends that the Middle East has returned to its pre-2011 order and will remain there for the foreseeable future. A third approach maintains that the region is still in a period of transition, has not yet settled into any order, and in the coming years will be characterized by uncertainty, instability, and volatility. The first two approaches are supported in some measure by the current regional landscape, but they fail to provide an overarching framework for understanding regional trends today. This article has advanced the third approach, which we believe provides a more comprehensive understanding of the region. At the heart of this approach lies the struggle we have identified over the shape of the Middle East.

Governments are struggling to assert full sovereignty over their countries, and their ability to address the myriad economic and social problems is undermined.

A New Order for the Middle East?

Those who subscribe to the idea that the region has settled into a new order point to several features of the contemporary region, including the shifting regional balance of power, the unprecedented political salience of publics, and the evolving configuration of Great Power involvement in the region. The turmoil has undercut the traditional dominance of Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, while other (notably, non-Arab) actors—chiefly Iran, Israel, and Turkey—have used the turbulence to expand their already salient regional influence. Iran today enjoys a much stronger military and political presence in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq than in the past. Israel has broadened its regional influence through bolstered security and intelligence cooperation with Jordan and Egypt, and recently through normalization agreements with some of the Gulf states— developments enabled, inter alia, by the downgrading of the Palestinian issue on the list of these countries’ priorities. In addition, Turkey has asserted its regional influence more aggressively in the last several years than perhaps in any other period since the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

At the same time, although states and borders remain the region’s organizing principles, many countries have had to resign themselves to limited sovereignty, reflected in the emergence of chaotic, contested, and ungoverned zones on their frontiers, the ascendance of militias and other non-state entities, and the need to share control over territory with other actors.
The Iraqi state, for example, may have survived the ISIS onslaught, but its central government remains weak compared to sub-state actors operating on its territory, and it is subject to heavy Iranian influence. In Egypt, the upheaval may not have ultimately overturned the military regime in place since 1952, but the post-2013 regime has struggled to impose its authority over the Sinai Peninsula. Bashar managed to retain sovereignty over segments of Syrian territory, but much of the state remains in the control of non-state actors, and both Russia and Iran continue to operate on Syrian territory, whether directly or via proxies.

Meanwhile, the Middle East has shifted from a regional system characterized, at least since the 1990s, by the dominance of a sole superpower (the US) to a system contending with competition and rivalry between several world powers (the US, Russia, and China). Through its presence in Syria in recent years, for example, Russia has secured its role as a superpower in the Middle East alongside the US, which has continued its gradual withdrawal from the region, and to a lesser degree, China. Between the US and Russia, a division of spheres of influence has emerged, with the US preserving its dominance in the Gulf, and Russia reviving its influence in the Fertile Crescent and, to some extent, in North Africa.

A Return to the Old Order?
Alternatively, it is possible to survey the region today and conclude that despite the tumult of the past decade, parts of the Middle East have retained the predominant characteristics of the pre-2011 order. According to this approach, the region still comprises the same countries, which, with some exceptions, have not undergone a significant internal reordering of the power structure long defining their regimes. Instead, the post-2011 regimes, whether holdovers from the earlier period or new arrivals since the uprisings, have met and adjusted to the challenges of the period in a manner that will likely permit them to retain power.

Likewise, notwithstanding the demands of protestors in 2011 (and, to a lesser extent, 2019) for individual rights and social justice, the last decade has not installed a fundamentally different political culture in the region. Countries of the Middle East continue to be characterized by authoritarian rulers, close links between wealth and power, bloated national bureaucracies, deep involvement by the military and state security system in politics and the economy, and religion’s centrality in public and private life. Sisi in Egypt resembles Mubarak before him; Bashar al-Assad remains in Syria; and the monarchies stand intact. Fundamental problems may persist, but the region’s leaders are more aware than before of the potential threat disaffected citizens pose to their rule, and they believe their policies have managed to contend with the challenges and will continue to do so.

Continuing Upheaval in the Middle East
Although there are remnants of the old order and hints of a new order, our argument about a fundamental struggle characterizing the region reflects the third approach, which maintains that the collapse of the pre-2011 order has not produced a new one in the Middle East, nor has the region returned to the old order. Rather, even as there are elements of a new order alongside islands of the old, the region remains in a protracted period of transition, as competing camps continue to fight for dominance and the outcome remains undecided. The Middle East will, therefore, remain prone to additional unrest, instability, and considerable uncertainty.

Although the borders of the region have remained intact, the countries within those borders have undergone significant changes over the last decade. And while many regimes have survived, leaders are more conscious of the publics and, hence, more aware of their own
vulnerability relative to the pre-2011 period. The notion of an ongoing upheaval is bolstered by the fact that the region’s fundamental economic deficiencies (e.g., youth unemployment, corruption, shadow economies, socio-economic inequality, and a crippling dependency on oil) and its identity struggles (whether religious, ethnic, or tribal) have not been resolved, and in many respects they have worsened since 2011, all the more so in light of the pandemic. Absent a solution, these problems will continue to fuel increasingly divergent expectations between regimes and publics, a dynamic that is liable to spark future waves of popular protest and/or migration from the region, which could bring equally destabilizing results.

Moreover, persistent struggles over political authority rage on, both within countries and between the various camps. Violence continues in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, where full political sovereignty remains elusive. Despite what has long been a looming victory in Syria, Assad must still contend with pockets of fighting and the intervention of external actors—namely, Iran, Russia, and Turkey—that undermine his sovereignty, even as they compete among themselves for influence. In Yemen, external interference from Iran and Saudi Arabia fuels the fighting and exacerbates an unwillingness of the warring parties to compromise. And in Libya, an armed conflict over territory and power continues among a slew of domestic actors (including two governments, dozens of militias, and vestiges of the Islamic State) and has invited growing interference from external actors such as the UAE, Turkey, and Egypt, with no sign of a resolution on the horizon. These violent struggles prevent, or at least impede, a consolidation of strong, centralized rule that could offer such countries the possibility of restored sovereignty, governing institutions, and functioning economies.

Even in countries that weathered the 2011 waves of protests without deteriorating into civil conflict (e.g., Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Iran), the resumption of mass demonstrations across the region in 2019 once again raised questions as to the resilience and cohesion of these regimes. Given the unaddressed grievances and the intensity of these ongoing struggles, the region might well undergo additional shockwaves in the coming years that could bring about additional, unexpected changes.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the salient contrast between our argument and the two alternatives presented here concerns the question of stability. The dividing line is between those who would contend that a relatively stable order (old or new) has taken hold in the Middle East, and those who believe the region remains unstable and, therefore, will continue to produce waves of unrest. This debate reflects conflicting assessments of the regimes’ abilities to manage what few would argue are endemic economic problems and ongoing identity-related crises that have gone largely unresolved. Adherents of the stable-order approaches implicitly assess that regimes have developed sufficient tools to contend with the current state of affairs, whereas the struggle we have outlined in this article suggests that the very existence of such regimes—particularly if they fail to adequately resolve core economic and social problems—could condemn the region to future bouts of unrest, similar to those witnessed in recent years.

On the face of it, the three alternatives invite very different conclusions about the future of the region. Yet the complexities of the regional system today are such that elements of all three can exist side by side, and the struggle we have outlined here partly reflects an ongoing battle between supporters of the old order, advocates of a new order, and those seeking to undermine any order. In the decade to come, properly assessing the Middle East regional system will require an analytical framework that incorporates elements of all three approaches and draws on expertise on transitional periods (i.e., periods characterized primarily by
instability, uncertainty, and volatility), a deep familiarity with the history and traditions of the region, and an evolving understanding of the region's characteristics as they have emerged in recent years.

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**References**


“Hollow Sovereignty”: Changes in the Status of the Arab Nation States One Decade after the Upheaval

Carmit Valensi and Kobi Michael

“The time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty…has passed; its theory was never matched by reality.”
Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 1992

Weighty processes took place during the Arab Spring that inter alia affected the status of the nation states in the Middle East and undermined their sovereignty. From the perspective of the ensuing decade, it appears that territorial borders and state frameworks were preserved, and sovereignty was therefore ostensibly maintained. This article proposes a more complex analysis of the term “sovereignty,” and presents the various ways in which sovereignty was manifested among countries in the region in 2010-2020. We propose reconsideration of the term with respect to what appears in the theoretical discourse of political science and international relations, in an attempt to examine the connections between the changes in the nature of sovereignty and the phenomenon of the failed state. We urge the adoption of typology reflecting the various levels and types of state sovereignty. Finally, we assess how an analysis of the region from the perspective
Introduction
The wave of Arab protests that began in the Middle East in December 2010 was the outgrowth of longstanding tyranny and suppression that compounded existing fundamental problems in the region, headed by performance failure in most of the Arab countries, which were at various levels of state failure. Inter alia, this caused deteriorating economic situations and high unemployment rates, especially among the educated younger generation. Globalization and technological developments, including the growth of the social networks, enabled a view of life beyond the Middle East. These processes highlighted the significance of state failure and heightened the sense of frustration and despair among populations, culminating in an unprecedented groundswell in the region, which unfolded in various waves. These in turn affected the status of the nation states and intensified trends of state failure, in which failed states become even greater failures (Syria, Yemen, Libya, Lebanon, and even Egypt are prominent examples), and in particular detracted from the essence of the term “sovereignty.”

For many years, sovereignty has been perceived as one of the cornerstones of the international system. The term has evolved over the years, however, with different meanings ascribed to it. Starting in the 1990s, the absolute value of the term “sovereignty” was undermined (Boutros-Ghali, 1992), mainly as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which accelerated globalization processes (among them the substantial expansion of the European Union) and led to growing military intervention in countries by foreign actors. Another factor was growing recognition of human and civil rights (Welsh, 2004, p. 2). Activity by non-state actors, which became possible in failed states where the central government lost effective control of its country’s peripheral areas, gained momentum during these years, and undermined and weakened nation states even further.

This article analyzes the changes that occurred in the status of the nation states in the Middle East in 2010-2020 through the term “sovereignty.” We offer a re-examination of the term as it appears in the theoretical discourse of political science and international relations, taking into account the reciprocal connections between sovereignty and the phenomenon of the failed state, and propose the adoption of typology reflecting the various levels and types of state sovereignty. Finally, we assess how an analysis of the region from the perspective of sovereignty can help achieve a deeper understanding of countries in the Middle East and the level of their stability.

The Concept of Sovereignty: Development, Evolution, and Limitation
The origins of the sovereign state lie in the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia—the agreement that ended the Thirty Years’ War. The principle of sovereignty, which means the legitimacy of the state’s absolute control of the population in a defined territory, was the basis of the realistic approach in international relations from the 1950s until the 1990s, with the concept assuming various meanings over the years.

Starting in the 1990s, the absolute value of the concept of sovereignty was undermined by globalization processes (particularly apparent in the European Union, which expanded substantially and rapidly following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the adoption of a shared currency, the euro) and the growing military intervention in countries by foreign actors.
Additional factors were growing recognition of the importance of human and civil rights (Welsh, 2004, p. 2) and the strengthening of non-state actors, which weakened the central government’s control over state territories, mainly in the peripheral areas, and weakened the central government and its ability to govern.

Weber and Biersteker defined sovereignty as “a political entity’s externally recognized right to exercise final authority over its affairs” (Weber & Biersteker, 1996, p. 2). Their definition emphasizes the external dimension of sovereignty, i.e., the independence of the state from other political entities, while Ruggie defines it as “the institutionalization of public authority within mutually exclusive jurisdictional domains,” thereby stressing the territorial aspect (Ruggie, 1983, p. 275).

In the early 2000s, it was increasingly evident that the modern Western model of a sovereign nation state is more the exception than the rule. Outside of the developed countries in the OECD, the level of statehood in most countries is limited, with sovereignty being only partial. External actors, whether state or non-state, are involved in political issues in governance (Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Lebanon are prominent examples). Yet despite the erosion in the concept of sovereignty in various cases in the Middle East, the theoretical discourse is still hostage to both a concept and fundamental assumptions that rely on the principles of the absolute or broad and effective sovereignty recognized in states with a high performance level, in contrast to failed states.

Stephen Krasner addresses this incongruence, inter alia by proposing a more complex typology of the concept of sovereignty. He assumes that only some of the world’s countries enjoy fully all types of sovereignty, which he defines according to three conditions, as follows: “A sovereign state is autonomous or independent; no external actor has authority within the state’s territorial boundaries and each sovereign state accepts the autonomy of other sovereigns. Finally, sovereign states are formally equal. Although they obviously vary with regard to size, population, resources, and wealth, every sovereign state has the right to sign treaties with others and to be free from interference by external actors” (Krasner, 2007).

Krasner distinguishes between four types of sovereignty: international sovereignty, meaning legal independence and mutual recognition of one state by another state; Westphalian sovereignty, meaning a state’s ability to exclude external actors from its structural authority in a given territory, i.e., autonomy; domestic sovereignty, namely, the organization of authority in a country by the central government and its ability to wield effective control within the country’s borders; and interdependence sovereignty, meaning a state’s ability to control trans-border movement of people, goods, and capital (Krasner, 2004, p. 88).

This typology makes it possible to discuss the concept of sovereignty more precisely, and at the varying levels between one state and another in the international political system. In effect, most states in the international system feature partial sovereignty, or as Krasner and Risse say, those states are “problematic sovereigns” (Krasner, 2001; Risse, 2013). A large proportion of the countries headed by these sovereigns continue to enjoy international recognition, but their domestic sovereignty is only partial, due to the rulers’ inability to control events in their country as a result of the involvement of external actors whose very actions undermine Westphalian sovereignty (Bolt, 2013). This does not mean that governance and the provision of public services do not exist in the country, rather, that external actors, whether state or non-state, also provide them, along with the central government authorities. In effect, this phenomenon is a prominent expression of a
failed state, defined, inter alia, as the central government’s weakness in providing the population with the range of state services for public benefit that are needed for the purpose of human security in its broader sense (Michael & Guzansky, 2017).

One of the prominent changes in the status of nation states is therefore linked to the idea of domestic sovereignty, which includes two key concepts: state authority and effective control.

One of the prominent changes in the status of nation states is therefore linked to the idea of domestic sovereignty, which includes two key concepts: state authority and effective control. State authority can exist without effective control in cases in which a majority of the population voluntarily consents to the government, without the application of force (in Egypt, for example). In most cases, a combination of the two elements is involved. Failed states, or those containing areas of limited statehood, such as Somalia, are acknowledged according to the definition of “international sovereignty”; their domestic sovereignty, however, is fragmented and fragile. In other words, there are areas in these countries in which the central government’s ability to enforce laws and decisions, and/or control of the means of violence and coercion is limited (Risse, 2013, p. 80). Such areas are not unique to failed or fragile countries whose domestic sovereignty has disappeared or been weakened. This distinction makes it possible to analyze cases of sovereign states containing areas, usually peripheral ones, in which domestic sovereignty is not applied or realized, and the ensuing ramifications of this lapse. Not only Somalia and Congo, defined as failed states, but also functional countries like Argentina, Indonesia, Russia, and even China contain areas in which statehood is limited or domestic sovereignty is fragmented.

Who does exercise control and governance in areas with partial domestic sovereignty? In areas in which state control exists at a high level, the central government is responsible for citizens’ internal and external security (through a monopoly on force, law, and order), and the supply of goods and services for the benefit of the public through the state institutions. In other areas, surprisingly, there are situations in which services continue not through the central government, but without chaos and anarchy. In effect, this is a state of governance without government (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992; Risse, 2013). Health, sanitation, security, and other services are provided by non-governmental assistance organizations of various types, or through representatives of foreign countries; non-state actors such as political institutions, religious entities, and NGOs; and violent organizations, such as terrorist and guerilla organizations, militias, criminal organizations, and gangs competing with the formal government for centers of power.

**Approaches and Conceptualizations about “Hollow Sovereignty”**

Current literature offers a number of terms for describing the complexity involved, one of which is a “hybrid political order.” The term refers to mixed governance applied by more than one entity (for example, a state sovereign), and includes entities from the local, national, regional, and international levels (Boege et al., 2009). From this, it can be understood that such actors do not act in isolation from the state; they conduct reciprocal relationships with it characterized by competition, and sometimes also by cooperation. These actors are also influenced by each other in the way that the organizations adopt state rhetoric and practice (insofar as non-state actors are involved, this involves a phenomenon of institutionalization; see Michael & Dostri, 2018). For their part, the states are affected by the non-state and informal agenda. If we return to Krasner’s typology, a hybrid political order reflects the idea of disruption of internal and Westphalian sovereignty.
One example of an interaction of this kind can be found in the past decade in the Syrian theater, in which the combination of a “formal state apparatus” and a variety of state actors (Russia, Israel, Iran, Turkey) and non-state actors (armed rebel groups, political opposition groups, Iranian-Shiite militias, Kurds, humanitarian organizations, and other civilian movements) has created an entire language and modus operandi in the field designed to deal with the division of power between the many actors: safe zones, de-confliction zones, de-escalation zones, no-fly zones, and special security zones. Furthermore, as of early 2021, Assad controls only about 60 percent of the country’s territory, and does not have complete enforcement ability or effective governance even there. The remaining areas where the central government has not succeeded in regaining control are operated as autonomous enclaves controlled by external parties competing with the central government: the Kurds in the north and northeast, rebel enclaves under Turkish sponsorship in the northwest, and rebel pockets in the south.

A term that has developed in public and research discourse with regard to the Iraqi theater is non-state (ladaula, in Arabic). The term, coined by Iraqi political sociologist Faleh A. Jabar, is meant to describe the current political struggle underway in the country since the popular uprising in Iraq in October 2019, which includes politicians, intellectuals, and journalists from all parts of the Iraqi socio-political spectrum. Jabar asserts that the term ladaula differs from terms such as “deep state” or “parallel state”; it refers to a range of configurations of actors operating from outside and within the state framework, i.e., entities that are not separate from the state. The term reflects a transition from Hobbes’s Leviathan state to a weakened state, but does not refer only to a strong state becoming a weak one, but also to polarization, division, and inability to conduct an orderly decision making process in the political order (Aziz, 2020).

The “mutation” in the essence of the sovereignty concept and the degree to which sovereignty is effectively applied arouse an immediate association with failed states. The terms “state failure” and “failed state” have been recognized for many years in theory and in practice. No one disputes there are several interfaces and links between the relative effectiveness of sovereignty and state failure, and that some of the measures developed for assessing state failure can therefore also be used in order to evaluate and classify the effectiveness of sovereignty. Some examples are the monopoly on the use of organized violence; the ability to prevent terrorism or attempted takeovers and the spread of non-state actors; the ability to defeat or deter intervention by foreign actors; the level of state services; and the ability to provide personal security to citizens, in the broad meaning of the concept (Michael & Guzansky, 2017, p. 18). The overlap and interfaces between the concepts of hollow sovereignty and state failure pose the question whether the failed state concept necessarily encompasses the concept of hollow sovereignty, and whether the focus on sovereignty and its conceptualization, as renewed and updated according to the circumstances that emerged during the decade of regional upheaval, indeed provides us with an additional analytical tool.

The concept of a failed state is a broad and inclusive concept that reflects the country’s institutional function, and also refers, inter alia, to parameters and dimensions pertaining to sovereignty. The weighted numerical values to calculate state failure, however, which take 12 indices into account, represent the assessment of the overall state performance. In this broad sense, the emphasis is on a state’s ability to fulfill the social contract with its citizens and provide them with human security in the wide and inclusive meaning of the concept (including eight different parameters, among them employment, housing, and education, beyond personal security) (Fragile States Index, 2020).
Presumably a high negative correlation was found between the level of state failure and the state's level of domestic sovereignty, because fragmented and hollow domestic sovereignty is necessarily correlated with the state's functional capability in the fulfillment of its social contract. This correlation, however, does not render discussion of the concept of sovereignty and its typology superfluous. For example, Syria, as a failed state in fourth place in the 2020 Fragile States Index, is still a country that exercises relatively effective domestic sovereignty in parts of its sovereign territory through the use of repressive mechanisms and with the help of foreign actors. In order to understand the level of Syria's performance in general, and the level of its sovereignty in particular, classifying it as a failed state is therefore not enough. The discussion of the concept of sovereignty enables us to distinguish between the failed performance level of countries and the level of their stability as state entities. If the Fragile States Index can be understood as an index focused on civilians and the institutional functioning of states, then the discussion of the concept of sovereignty expands the perspective in the direction of the regional, security, and strategic dimension.

Between the Arab Spring and State Sovereignty in the Middle East, 2010-2020

The initial revolutionary phase took place in 2010-2011, with a wave of public protests in the Arab world that led to the overthrow of four regimes (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen). The regime in Syria became bogged down in a bloody civil war, and there were various levels of instability in other countries (Iraq, Bahrain, Jordan, Sudan, and Lebanon). Until the beginning of what became known as the Arab Spring, it appeared that the political and military elites were the pivotal actors in the region. The popular protests revealed the important role of the public space, with citizens emerging as a force motivating and shaping both internal and external processes, especially as an element capable of destabilizing the rulers' domestic sovereignty, i.e., their ability to enforce their authority and rule over the country's population within its borders.

Since this article, like the entire issue of the journal, deals with the emerging regional order and attempts to characterize the changing regional architecture, the issue of sovereignty is extremely important. Characteristics of sovereignty in each country in turn affect the regional architecture. Actually, sovereignty can be viewed as a key element in the logic that shapes the regional architecture. A thorough analysis of the differences between types of sovereignty is likely to help us characterize the regional order more accurately through its elements—states and the degree of their effective control of a territory and population, together with other countries' recognition and attitude to borders, autonomy, and legitimacy of respective countries in the management of their affairs.
ideological group, also represented by Turkey and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, with support from Qatar. Shortly afterwards, it emerged that these movements did not succeed in sustaining their initial political success, and the “era of political Islam” as an alternative to the secular autocratic order waned.

The rise of the Salafi-jihadi idea in 2014-2016, and its organizational manifestation in the form of the Islamic State added to the regional complexity. It appeared that this was bound to shape the Middle East order in the coming years. Its cruelty and extremism, however, prompted a regional and international campaign against it. In addition, it encountered difficulties in the dialectic space between realization of the Islamic nation vision via violent jihad and the need for political institutionalization to improve its ability to exercise effective control of a territory and population. Ultimately, this led to the overthrow of the Islamic caliphate and weakened the power of its attraction.

It appeared that this was bound to shape the Middle East order in the coming years. Its cruelty and extremism, however, together with the regional and international campaign against it and the difficulties that it encountered in the dialectic space between realization of the Islamic nation vision via violent jihad and the need for political institutionalization process for the purpose of improving its ability to exercise effective control of a territory and population, led to the overthrow of the Islamic caliphate and weakened the power of its attraction.

In the three phases described above, the prevalent assumption was that states in the Middle East were in a process of collapsing. At this stage, not only was domestic sovereignty fragmented, but a threat to Westphalian sovereignty—the ability of a state to exclude external actors from the state’s structural authority in a specific territory—began to emerge. This conceptual framework made it possible to explain the following cases: Syria, a country then at the peak of a bloody civil war, saw control divided among the regime, the rebels, and jihad groups, with intervention by regional and international actors in the background. Iraq, which was effectively split into three entities—Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish—was subject to the growing influence of Iran on the one hand and an American presence on the other. Libya, divided into two rival state entities, has been unable to stabilize itself since the overthrow of Qaddafi. It is under the control of clans and gangs, and has become a theater of struggle between regional actors (Turkey, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar) and international actors (Russia, France). South Sudan, which underwent a violent and bloody civil war, has maintained its dubious high position on the list of the world’s most fragile states (third place in the Fund for Peace index for 2020), and Yemen experienced a coup d’état, with the Houthis (an ethnic group affiliated with the Zaidis, a Shiite sect) seizing control of the central government.

Even countries that did not fall apart during this period (Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan) experienced prolonged instability and severe internal distress that undermined their domestic sovereignty.

The collapsing states thesis rested primarily on the historical explanation, whereby most of the nation states in the region were relatively new creations of the past 100 years—the result of Anglo-French imperialism. Britain and France divided up the remains of the Ottoman Empire into regions of influence in the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, and later at the San Remo Conference in 1920, which ratified the Sykes-Picot Agreement and expanded it into an agreement giving the two countries a mandate to control various areas. The artificial borders of the states founded under this mandate ignored the fragile ethnic, religious, and tribal composition of the region. This unstable starting point, the difficult underlying conditions, and especially deep state failure, featuring continual erosion of the social contract between the regimes and the public, are what led to the
undermining of the various types of state sovereignty in the region.

One of the main factors that aggravated the decline of internal and Westphalian sovereignty in the region’s states is the growing proliferation of non-state actors in the Middle East. Although this is not a new phenomenon, it has increased in extent and force (Del Sarto et al., 2019, pp. 12-14). In addition to the violent non-state actors that have operated in the region in recent decades, such as Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah, which has challenged Lebanese sovereignty and which functions as an Iranian proxy in the fighting in Syria and other theaters, new militant organizations have joined the violent regional landscape. Some of these are jihad organizations officially affiliated with al-Qaeda, while others are independent.

In June 2014, the ISIS organization—the Islamic State (formerly the al-Qaeda branch in Iraq)—declared the founding of a caliphate in areas in western Iraq and eastern Syria, and called for other factions around the world to swear fealty to it. This development not only further eroded internal state sovereignty, but also challenged the border between the two countries and the map of the entire Middle East. This led to increased involvement by external actors in the two countries’ affairs in the name of fighting terrorism. The result was disruption of both Westphalian sovereignty and interdependence sovereignty, i.e., the central government’s ability to control movements of capital, populations, ideas, and so on from outside the state’s borders towards another country.

“Strengthening” Domestic Sovereignty at the Expense of Westphalian Sovereignty, 2016-2019

In subsequent years, it appeared that the trend toward the rise of popular and religious movements (the Muslim Brotherhood, followed by the Islamic State) ebbed. As if to close a circle, states in the region began to resume their functioning as important actors in control of political processes, together with growing intervention by international actors, primarily Russia and the United States, in the regional turmoil. The cyclical dynamic that had seemingly ended repositioned the nation states as the most significant unit for analysis, while the influence of popular opinion as a catalyst for political change accordingly waned. This led many scholars in the Middle East and the rest of the world to assume that the upheaval had ended.

Two events in the Middle East during those years—the defeat of the Islamic State and the imminent end of the war in Syria (or at least the stage of major fighting there)—underlie the idea that the Middle East is headed for a new and more stable era, whose main characteristic will be the rejuvenation of the nation state and the strengthening of all aspects of state sovereignty. Egypt, where President el-Sisi seeks to give the impression that the situation is now “normal,” is cited as an example. In general, it appeared that the Middle East was again engaged in day-to-day matters, with the regional agenda determined by state actors.

A wave of articles about political science and the Middle East appeared in the scholarly literature citing the strengthening of nation states and all types of their sovereignty as the outstanding characteristic in the present time. Egyptian scholar Abdel Monem Said Aly wrote in December 2018,

The Middle East has passed its bleakest moments since the Arab Spring and has moved toward greater stability. At the root of this change is the return of the nation-state and the relative decline of non-state actors, and the return of the nation-state has coincided with the return of geo-politics as the basis for interstate interactions in the region.…. Although these positive tendencies will come up against a number of serious challenges, there are compelling reasons to believe that the region’s
The thesis about the dismantling of the state order and the collapse of the Sykes-Picot framework has been disproved—Iraq, Syria, and even Yemen and Libya remain state entities, albeit crumbling and failed. At the same time, it is essential to distinguish between the external boundaries and the state framework on the one hand and what is underway inside the country on the other.

Since late 2010, domestic sovereignty in most of the Middle East republics has been weakened, and in the combat theaters (Libya, Syria, Yemen), Westphalian sovereignty and interdependence sovereignty have been fragmented. On the other hand, as this article goes to press, the international sovereignty (i.e., the external and legal recognition of the state’s borders) has remained as before in all Middle East countries. The exclusive reliance on this type of sovereignty is liable to distort the evaluation of the status of countries in the region, including where the level of their stability is concerned. Furthermore, in Syria, the regime has successfully acted as a sovereign to some extent in the center and west of the country, but the levels of sovereignty and effective governance vary from one area to another (relatively high in Damascus, compared with an inability to rule in Daraa in the south of the country). The situation is even more complex in a country divided into two entities, like Libya, and in the Palestinian theater, in which two separate and even competing entities have operated since 2007.

The analytical conclusion is that there is a need to differentiate between types of sovereignty and the effectiveness of governance in a given country, and in the ability to make comparisons between countries and between different regions in the same country by creating categories relevant to the comparison that can characterize the changing regional architecture and help observers understand the significance and developing trends resulting from the changes in that architecture.
Adopting this conceptual framework is likely to help us avoid deterministic and linear assessments in the future whereby the Arab Spring has ended because popular opinion prefers stability to chaos. We should recognize the persistent weakness of domestic sovereignty in countries in the region, which has maintained, and will probably maintain in the future, the lack of satisfaction among the public, which in turn fosters internal weakness. As of now, a decade after the onset of the upheaval, the internal theater in most Middle East countries is more unstable and fragile than in any other period. More waves of upheaval began in 2019, led by public pressure that prompted the resignation of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April; the overthrowing of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir after four months of protests that originally focused on an increase in bread prices, but which highlighted the people’s difficult economic situation in much broader fashion; the outbreak of the “WhatsApp protests” in Lebanon in response to the government’s failure to find solutions to the economic crisis in the country during the preceding year; a series of protests in Iraq against corruption, unemployment, and inefficient public services; and the resumption of violent riots in Iran in November in protest against a steep hike in the price of gasoline, which are continuing at various levels of intensity. All of these reflect to an increasing extent the weakness of domestic sovereignty in these countries.

When we discuss the survival of the state order in the Middle East, it is therefore important to distinguish between the state framework and the country’s borders (embodied in international, Westphalian, and interdependence sovereignty) and what is underway within the country (domestic sovereignty), which is a reflection of the state failure phenomenon. International recognition of the state’s borders and its territorial integrity are no guarantee of the level of sovereignty inside the country in the functional sense. Following a decade of upheaval, the regional situation has undermined the substance of internal state sovereignty, and has accelerated state failure processes. In turn, these processes have increased the involvement of external actors and non-state actors in the countries’ sovereign territory (Michael & Guzansky, 2017, pp. 39-40). Furthermore, in certain countries, such as Syria and Libya, the ability of the regime (two regimes, in the case of Libya) to exercise even partial domestic sovereignty depends on aid from external actors. For example, the Syrian regime receives aid from Russia and Iran, while the government of Field Marshall Haftar in Libya receives assistance from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and others. Theoretically, Westphalian sovereignty in Syria and Libya has been weakened with the consent of the central regime, which is unable to manage the state’s affairs independently. The obvious question in these contexts is what is the essence of this sovereignty, which depends on aid from external foreign actors. Do we have here a new pattern of sovereignty, and if so, what is its significance for those countries and their domestic sovereignty?

Conclusion and Recommendations
More than a dichotomous perspective of weakness versus strength of state sovereignty, this article proposes a more complex evaluation of the region, based on a model of nation states that do not meet the definition of functioning sovereign nation states; they feature fragmented, unstable, fragile, and hollow sovereignty. Building on Krasner’s typology, this article seeks to add a clearer analysis of the term “state sovereignty.” If sovereignty is defined as effective control by the state or the central government over the population in a given territory, then a look at the region suggests that a distinction can be made not only between the existing types of sovereignty, but also between different levels and ranks of domestic sovereignty across countries and within countries in order to achieve a better evaluation of their performance and stability.
For example, in the Middle East context, an axis can be sketched that ranges from the value of effective domestic sovereignty on one end, which can be found in the Gulf monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman, to minimal sovereignty on the other end, such as in Yemen. The various countries in the region can be positioned along the axis, with their location on the axis representing different values of sovereignty. Libya can be placed close to the end of the axis representing an absence of sovereignty, Syria not far from there, Egypt in the middle of the axis, and so on.

Beyond this, different levels of domestic sovereignty within a given country can be distinguished in order to explain more precisely the extent of control in the country, including its stability. For example, a distinction can be made between effective state sovereignty by a given regime in core areas, in contrast to weak sovereignty in the country’s peripheral areas—Syria and Iraq are possible examples. In these cases, when one state entity embodies different effectiveness levels of sovereignty, the conceptualization of fragmented or hollow sovereignty is likely to be of assistance in achieving a better understanding of the complex situation.

Despite the uncertainty typical of the Middle East, the region will presumably continue to suffer from instability, identity, and legitimacy crises, and ongoing deterioration, violence, and authoritarianism in the coming years. All of this obviously has implications for the status of the countries’ sovereignty. As Cook writes, “If authoritarian stability was once a hallmark of the Middle East, the future may well be authoritarian instability” (Cook, 2020). Authoritarian conduct of the region’s countries, which tends to concentrate all political authority in these state hands, does not guarantee the integrity of the state’s sovereignty. On the contrary; the historical tendency of regimes in the region, and of authoritarian regimes in general, to concentrate political authority in their hands encounters difficulties resulting from a lack of resources, the need to prioritize governance, and competing entities operating in their territory.

Future research should analyze the term “sovereignty” more deeply, while starting from the assumption that the term represents more of an ideal type than something that describes the existing and empirical state of affairs. The regional and international political order in recent decades has featured countries in which sovereignty is relative, and is sometimes no more than hollow sovereignty.

When one state entity embodies different effectiveness levels of sovereignty, the conceptualization of fragmented or hollow sovereignty is likely to be of assistance in achieving a better understanding of the complex situation.

References
The Erdoganian Amalgam: The Ottoman Past, the Ataturk Heritage, and the Arab Upheaval

Gallia Lindenstrauss and Remi Daniel

The rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey in 2002 brought many changes to Turkish foreign policy. During the party’s first terms, soft power predominated in Turkey’s foreign relations, and Turkey expanded and deepened its relations with many Middle East countries. Since 2016, however, Turkey has reverted increasingly to the use of hard power tools, and its relations with many political actors in the Middle East have become increasingly hostile. This article assesses the changing pattern in Turkey’s foreign policy in the Middle East since 2013—both the degree of Ankara’s activism and its new directions. The main contention is that the geopolitical changes resulting from the Arab upheaval and domestic trends in Turkey have led Erdogan to draw from the Turkish Republic’s traditional foreign policy and the Ottoman past, thereby creating a foreign policy amalgam that is unique in Turkish history. Both the Islamic dimension and the nationalist line, which pits Turkey against some of Israel’s allies, create certain risks for Israel.

Keywords: Turkey, Middle East, Arab upheaval, Erdogan, Syria, Libya, Israel
The rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey in 2002 was accompanied by changes in Turkish foreign policy. During the party’s first terms in office, soft power predominated in Turkey’s foreign relations, and Turkey successfully expanded and deepened its relations with many Middle East countries. Since 2016, however, Turkey has increasingly reverted to the use of hard power tools in its foreign policy, and its relations with many states in the region have grown increasingly hostile. Overall, during the two decades in which the AKP has been in power, Ankara has pursued a more active and assertive policy that has more than once substantially deviated from patterns typical of the Turkish Republic. In particular, Turkish intervention in the internal affairs of neighboring countries to help determine who will control them is new for Ankara. For example, while Turkey and Syria were on the verge of war in 1998, Ankara did not attempt to overthrow the regime of Hafez al-Assad, as it later did with the regime of his son Bashar.

From the Turkish Republic’s traditional foreign policy, Erdogan has adopted nationalism, militarization, and suspicion toward the rest of the world. From the Ottoman past, he has assimilated the religious dimension, the element of territorial expansion, and revisionism. Since this is an amalgam, the relative weight of the respective dimensions varies over time.

The purpose of this article is to assess the factors behind the changing patterns in Turkey’s foreign policy in the Middle East, focusing on Turkish foreign policy since 2013. This year was selected for two main reasons. One is the fall of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in 2013, which was a blow to the vision of an axis of countries dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood movement, an axis that Turkey had hoped to lead. The second reason is the Gezi Park demonstrations that year. Furthermore, as part of the escalating struggle between religious leader Fethullah Gulen and then-Turkish Prime Minister (and current President) Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his supporters, extensive corruption was revealed that same year that changed Erdogan’s perception of the internal threat. Our main contention is that the geopolitical changes resulting from the Arab upheaval and domestic trends in Turkey have led Erdogan to create a foreign policy amalgam that is unique in Turkish history. From the Turkish Republic’s traditional foreign policy, he has adopted nationalism, militarization, and suspicion toward the rest of the world. From the Ottoman past, he has assimilated the religious dimension, the element of territorial expansion, and revisionism. Since this is an amalgam, the relative weight of the respective dimensions varies over time, depending on the issue and the period.

Background
Ahmet Davutoglu, who became chief foreign policy advisor to the Prime Minister in 2003 and later served as Minister of Foreign Affairs, tried to promote both the idea of “strategic depth,” whereby Ankara can and should play a more significant role in the areas adjacent to it, and a “zero problems policy” aimed at advancing a solution for existing problems between Turkey and its neighbors (Murinson, 2006, pp. 947-948; Aras, 2009, p. 134). As part of this policy, Turkey greatly improved its relations with Syria, and even mediated between Israel and Syria in four rounds of talks during 2008. Although Turkey opposed the Gulf War of 2003, the developments...
that followed the US intervention in Iraq led Turkey to improve its relations with the Kurdish government in northern Iraq (Park, 2012, pp. 98-99). Not long before the outbreak of the Arab upheaval, Turkey also announced its intention to establish a free trade zone with Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan (BBC News, 2010).

When the Arab upheaval began, Erdogan was among the first leaders who called on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to resign. Commenting on relations between Turkey and Egypt in a New York Times interview in 2011, Foreign Minister Davutoğlu said, “That will be an axis of democracy of the two biggest nations in our region, from the north to the south, from the Black Sea down to the Nile Valley in Sudan” (Shadid, 2011). During this period, Turkey regarded itself, and was regarded by some in the West, as a possible model for countries weathering the upheaval (Friedman, 2015). Ankara encouraged Bashar al-Assad to carry out internal reforms in Syria (Cagaptay, 2020, pp. 116-117); only in November 2011, after six months of unsuccessful efforts at persuasion, did Erdogan for the first time publicly call on Assad to resign. In Libya, Turkey’s policy was hesitant—it initially opposed a military operation against Libyan ruler Muammar Qaddafi, although following a UN Security Council resolution, took part in the NATO-led military intervention in Libya.

The downfall of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 was a turning point in Turkey’s attitude toward the Arab upheaval. Until then, Ankara believed that Turkey was “on the right side of history” (Arkan & Kinacioglu, 2016, p. 396). Developments since the Arab upheaval, however, cast much doubt on whether Turkey’s policy of clearly supporting one of the sides in the countries that experienced the upheaval was correct. Furthermore, the rise to power of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt prompted a severe deterioration in relations between Egypt and Turkey. Since then, while Turkey has little ability to intervene directly in Egypt, it hosts Muslim Brotherhood exiles from Egypt, and Erdogan frequently uses the Rabaa sign, which has become a symbol for Morsi supporters (Kirişci, 2017, p. 164).

For many, the agreement between Turkey and Qatar in late 2014 on the establishment of a Turkish military base in Qatar was a watershed signaling a new direction in Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East. The Turkish presence in Qatar was actually one of the factors that led Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt to impose a blockade on Qatar in 2017, although Doha and Ankara believed that the Turkish presence was one of the factors that prevented the occupation of Qatar that year (Cagaptay, 2020, p. 190).

Assad’s hold on power, and especially the Iranian and Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict, which tilted the balance in Assad’s favor, prompted Ankara to take a series of actions pertaining to events in Syria. While Turkey initially gave active support to most of the Sunni factions that rebelled against Assad, including the extremist groups, since 2016 it has emphasized military intervention and a military presence in northern Syria in order to halt the Kurdish buildup in this region. In Libya, Turkey’s interests led to its growing intervention there after the civil war was renewed in 2014, and to overt military intervention in favor of the Government of National Accord, which was officially approved by the Turkish parliament in January 2020 (Weise, 2020).

The Geopolitical Factor

Events of the Arab upheaval led Turkey to believe that guerrilla and terrorist operations by the Kurdish underground and terrorist operations by Salafi-jihadi groups in adjacent areas were jeopardizing its security (Kirişci, 2017, p. 152). Threats of this type also existed previously, but before the Arab upheaval, Syrian-Turkish relations had improved to the extent that the countries even conducted a joint military exercise for the first time in history.

After the civil war in Syria erupted, violence from Syria began to spread to Turkey, with
bombardments in border areas between the two countries. Turkey suffered many deadly terrorist attacks by the Islamic State organization, especially in 2015-2016. The deterioration in relations between Syria and Turkey and the damage caused to Turkey by developments during the civil war can explain Turkey’s renewed use of hard power tools. At the same time, current Turkish foreign policy also resonates of earlier periods, when Turkey perceived the threat of the Kurdish underground as a central threat that justified strong military action.

The deterioration in relations between Syria and Turkey and the damage caused to Turkey by developments during the civil war can explain Turkey’s renewed use of hard power tools.

The tough policy adopted by Erdogan against Assad meant that Assad’s continued rule in Damascus in effect constituted an ongoing potential threat to Turkey, above all in the event of future Syrian encouragement of operations by the Kurdish underground against Turkey from Syrian territory, as indeed occurred under Hafez al-Assad. Turkey’s need in 2013, as a result of the escalating civil war in Syria, to ask NATO to station Patriot missile barriers in Turkish territory was one of the justifications cited by Turkey for its purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia in 2017.

Cooperation between the international coalition in the war against the Islamic State and the Syrian branch of the Kurdish underground (PYD) also contributed to the Turkish threat perception and concern about the creation of an independent Kurdish entity in northern Syria. Although the coalition’s support for the PYD was part of a broader framework of aid for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Turkey asserted that the PYD was the dominant element in the SDF (Park, 2020, p. 196). Ankara alleged that the arms sent to the SDF would not be collected after the defeat of the Islamic State, and therefore constituted a direct threat to Turkey. Turkish concern about the creation of a Kurdish belt separating Turkey from the rest of the Middle East, which in the worst scenarios included a Kurdish state with access to the sea independent of Turkey, was a result not only of developments in northern Syria, but also of developments in northern Iraq. Had they not been thwarted by countries in the region, the Kurds in northern Iraq would have wanted to declare independence following the independence referendum in the autonomous Kurdish region in 2017.

The prevailing idea in the Middle East dating from the Obama administration and continuing into the Trump administration was that the United States sought to reduce its involvement in the region. This in turn created a vacuum that encouraged countries in the region, especially Turkey, to take independent action. The realization that Moscow has more influence in Syria than Washington also explains why Erdogan holds frequent talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin (Van Bladel, 2020, pp. 207-209). The harsh Russian response after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane in November 2015 left a severe scar. Furthermore, what Ankara regarded as a lack of support from NATO in this crisis heighted Turkish fears that they were essentially alone. After Turkey and Russia restored normal relations in June 2016, Ankara was visibly cautious vis-à-vis Moscow, and tried to achieve understandings with Russia in advance when planning its intervention in northern Syria. The fact that the process of Turkey’s accession to the European Union has bogged down, in part because of opposition by France and Germany, which are important members in NATO, also contributed to Turkish suspicion of the West.

In addition, Ankara’s recognition of the changes in the international order, from a US-dominated unipolar order to a multipolar order in which it is possible, and indeed necessary, to diversify the parties to rely upon, has led Turkey to take more and more actions that deviate from what would normally be expected
from a loyal NATO member. In particular, the purchase of S-400 air defense systems from Russia, despite severe warnings against such a purchase from the United States and the other NATO members, has created a dynamic of responses that further weakened the alliance. For example, the exclusion of Turkey from the F-35 stealth aircraft project, even though Turkey manufactures a few of the plane’s parts and had planned to buy about 100 of the aircraft, has put the Turkish air force in a position in which it lacks an adequate replacement for its aging inventory of F-16s.

The issue of the Uyghurs, an ethnically Turkish Muslim minority in China suffering from harsh repression by the Chinese government, also illustrates Turkey’s considerations in the context of changes in the world order. Despite the broad scope of the repression and the various campaigns within Turkish society to arouse awareness of this issue, Erdogan has been moderate in his comments in recent years in order to avoid offending the Chinese government, which can be useful to Turkey as an ally in certain matters, or at least helpful from an economic standpoint (Erdemir & Kowalski, 2020a; IISS, 2020, p. iv).

Taspinar asserts that Turkish foreign policy should be regarded as a Turkish version of Gaullism (Taspinar, 2010), with Erdogan playing the role of a Turkish de Gaulle in his attitude toward NATO and his emphasis on the importance of Turkey taking an independent line in its foreign policy. The consequence of such a policy line is greater self-reliance. Indeed, Turkey was previously more dependent on arms imports, especially imports of advanced weapons, but has since made significant progress in its ability to manufacture arms by itself. This includes progress in the production of drones, which have served Turkey well, including in its intervention in Syria and Libya. Turkey opposed sanctions against Iran in the context of the Iranian nuclear program and helped Tehran evade the sanctions, and Erdogan stated publicly for the first time in September 2019 that Turkey might also develop an independent military nuclear capability, which is in line with the Gaullist attributes of his policy. The growth in independent capabilities has enabled the country to act boldly without external pressures, including in regions far from its borders, with Libya a prominent example.

The natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea have made the delineation of economic waters among the various countries a critical matter.

Turkey’s geographic location between the Middle East and Europe also contributes to the pressure exerted on it on the one hand, and to its being perceived as influential in the region on the other. Despite the severe damage to Turkey from terrorist activity by the Islamic State, international elements accused Turkey of cooperation with the organization, and asserted that Ankara was one of the parties providing the Islamic State with freedom of action. Approximately one million refugees fled to Europe in 2015, most of them via Turkey. Turkey and the European Union subsequently signed agreements in which €6 billion were given to Turkey to help with the refugees and prevent them from crossing the Turkish-EU border. From time to time, Ankara threatens to open its border and send the refugees to the European Union. It appears, however, that the European Union is striving to prevent the entry of many more Syrian refugees into its territory by means of a combination of preventive measures (such as construction of a land fence between Turkey and Greece) and additional monetary incentives for Turkey.

The ties between the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean have become closer, and have affected Turkey’s geopolitical calculations. Since 2010, in parallel with the deterioration in Turkish-Israeli relations, Israel’s relations with Greece and Cyprus have improved markedly. In tandem, relations between Egypt, Cyprus, and
Greece have also become closer. The natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea have made the delineation of economic waters among the various countries a critical matter. Egypt’s success in spearheading the founding of the EastMed Gas Forum (EMGF) in 2019, in which Turkey is not a member, gave Turkey the feeling that it was surrounded (Rivlin, 2020). Turkey’s military intervention in Libya, for example, in parallel with a military cooperation agreement with the Government of National Accord, must be understood with reference to the agreement signed by Turkey delineating the economic waters of Libya and Turkey. This latter agreement clashes with some of the Greek claims to territorial waters. Turkey is thus a connecting element between these two theaters: for example, Ankara recruited Syrian rebels to fight on the side of the Government of National Accord in Libya. This Turkish policy of linking the different regions and conflicts may have achieved some success in the various theaters in the short term, but it can also generate a basis for new connections among players hostile to Turkey.

The Ottoman past plays an increasing role in Turkish society as a whole, and especially in statements by Erdogan to justify certain activity.

Historical Legacies: Neo-Ottomanism, the Sèvres Syndrome, and the Shadow of Ataturk

One of the terms appearing frequently in descriptions of Turkey’s foreign policy is “neo-Ottomanism.” Many commentators, both media and academic, often label Erdogan a “sultan” and refer to his policy as neo-Ottomanism. Use of the term did not begin with Erdogan; it was used extensively to describe the changes in Turkish politics instituted by Turkish President Turgut Ozal in the 1980s (Yavuz, 2016). It takes note of revolutionary changes in comparison with the Turkish Republic’s policy since the days of Ataturk, who advocated adherence to the status quo. It refers to growing Turkish activism, and the introduction of pan-Turkish and Islamic elements into the political narrative. Today, among the general public, “neo-Ottomanism” is used primarily by parties hostile to Turkey in order to allege expansionism, or to condemn measures that conflict with Western interests. In an extreme case, the term is used to accuse Erdogan of intending to establish an area under Turkish influence and control corresponding to the borders of the old Ottoman Empire, or even “to re-establish the Ottoman Empire.”

In the academic world, some experts have tried to find a neutral definition of neo-Ottomanism in order to make the term more useful in research, but there is no real agreement on its meaning. Neo-Ottomanism is a dynamic phenomenon that depends on whether it is examined from the perspective of Turkey’s internal or foreign policy. The meaning also depends on which aspect of the Ottoman Empire is analyzed (Danforth, 2014). Because of the differences of opinion and the difficulty in defining it, it appears that the term neo-Ottomanism is not precise enough for use as an effective analytical parameter, especially in the field of foreign policy (Wastnidge, 2019).

However, it can still be argued that Turkish foreign policy is neo-Ottoman in the sense of its greater activity and activism (Tanchum, 2020), and that the Ottoman tint is undeniable in a number of Turkish actions in the international theater. Indeed, although the Turkish leadership avoids any use of the term neo-Ottomanism, particularly as a description of its policy, the Ottoman past plays an increasing role in Turkish society as a whole, and especially in statements by Erdogan to justify certain activity. For example, in talking about Jerusalem, the Turkey’s President stated in October 2020, “In this city that we had to leave in tears during the First World War, it is still possible to come across traces of the Ottoman resistance. So Jerusalem is our city, a city from us” (Ahren, 2020). Territory that belonged to the Ottoman Empire has a significant position in Turkey’s
international efforts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and to some extent in the Balkans. Nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire likewise plays a considerable role in Turkey’s soft power policy, as demonstrated by the great success of the Turkish “historical” television series—in the Middle East, the Muslim world, and even in the Balkans (Bhutto, 2020).

Nevertheless, the term neo-Ottomanism should be used with great caution. First of all, the growing scope of Turkish activity in recent years extends to theaters that have no connection to the Ottoman Empire, such as West Africa. Turkey’s increasing presence in these areas highlights the limitations of any analysis giving excessive weight to the effect of the Ottoman Empire’s heritage. Similarly, the conflict with the Kurdish underground, a key focus of Turkish foreign policy, has little to do with the Ottoman legacy. Furthermore, if historical events are indeed shaping current Turkish policy, the period of the Ottoman Empire is only one of these multiple historical events, and possibly not the most important one. Exaggerated emphasis on the Ottoman period or excessive use of the term neo-Ottomanism can obscure other seminal processes and detract from a true understanding of the complex historical roots of current Turkish foreign policy.

The early 20th century, which saw a decade of almost continuous fighting on Turkish territory, internal unrest, and hostile actions by the major powers, left an especially strong mark on Turkish public opinion. The symbol of these processes in Turkish consciousness is the Treaty of Sèvres, signed in 1920, in which the European powers divided up most of Turkey’s territory among themselves and their regional allies. Turkish collective memory has been so strongly affected by this event, which is repeatedly mentioned in political speeches, that references to a “Sèvres Syndrome” are common (Schmid, 2015). The term describes a Turkish geopolitical perception of the constant threat posed by an alliance of international and regional actors allegedly operating within and outside the country in order to weaken Turkey. This concept was revived on various occasions in the 20th century, for example in the Cypriot crisis in the 1960s and 1970s and the struggle against the Kurdish movements, and is still an important factor shaping current Turkish foreign policy (Tharoor, 2020). For example, Turkish hostility to the relations between Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, with support from the United States and several European countries, can be attributed to this perception. The relations between these countries ostensibly feed the Sèvres Syndrome, which is a better explanation for the Turkish response than neo-Ottomanism.

Another important period in Turkish history is the rule of Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Turkish Republic. Despite Erdogan’s obvious efforts to place himself outside the classic Kemalist framework, Ataturk remains a model for Turkish leadership, even for a politician from an Islamic political party. In many international theaters, it appears that the current President is trying to eclipse the country’s first President by completing processes portrayed in retrospect as partial successes by Ataturk (Akyol, 2016).

For example, the Turkish operations in northern Syria and northern Iraq are in territories that the Turkish national movement defined as Turkish territory before Ataturk agreed to waive Turkey’s claim to them. For many of Erdogan’s supporters, the entry of Turkish forces into these regions is an achievement that compensates for this renunciation. In the same way, problems in delineating the maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean are a result of some of the provisions in the Treaty of Lausanne signed by Ataturk following the Turkish war of independence. Here, too, Erdogan can portray himself as going a step further than Ataturk (Gorvett, 2020). In many respects, the Turkish President’s historical vision is to contrast himself favorably to the secular Ataturk, rather than being portrayed as a “new sultan.”

The term neo-Ottomanism is therefore equivocal. While it does signify a real change
underway since the 1980s that was significantly accelerated under Erdogan’s rule, accompanied by a strengthening of the Ottoman heritage in Turkish society and in various spheres in the country, it is not sufficiently precise or comprehensive as a tool in analyzing processes underway in Turkey’s foreign policy, because it sometimes has hostile political connotations, which undermine its value as a research parameter. Furthermore, although the history of the Turkish people is often mentioned in speeches by the country’s leaders, the effect of that history on foreign policy is more diverse and complex than a focus on the Ottoman Empire alone (Danforth, 2020).

Internal Dimension: Between Politics and the Economy
In Turkey, as in most countries, separating domestic considerations and the economy from foreign policy is impossible. The internal-political struggle between Erdogan and the military, and between Erdogan and the Gulen movement, as well as the issue of the Kurdish minority, are among the factors that have shaped Turkish foreign policy over the years. During his first decade in power, Erdogan saw benefits in large-scale political reforms and a generally more liberal approach, including toward the Kurdish minority, which was a significant contribution to Turkey’s relations with the European Union. During his second decade in power, the conflict with the Gulen movement, the deadlock in the process of Turkey’s accession to the European Union, and the negative effects of the Arab upheaval in Turkey led Erdogan to value an alliance with the nationalist groups. This led to a renewed emphasis on hard power, renewal of the violent conflict with the Kurdish underground, and alienation from the West.

During the AKP’s first decade in power, the party’s worst fear was overthrow by the Turkish military, and it therefore promoted liberal reforms aimed, inter alia, at reducing the army’s ability to wield influence in Turkish politics. Toward the end of the decade, Erdogan and Gulen, who at that point were still cooperating with each other, had prominent figures in the army arrested on false, or at least exaggerated, charges of conspiring to remove the AKP from power. These developments in the domestic theater also had effects on foreign policy. One of the explanations for the AKP’s consistent support for the Hamas movement since 2006 is Erdogan’s claim that just as the election of the Justice and Development Party was initially not fully accepted, the international community did not recognize that Hamas won a majority in the 2006 elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council. Erdogan likewise perceived the overthrow of Morsi by the Egyptian army in 2013 as an event that foretold what was liable to happen to him, if he were not careful. His alienation from Israel can also be explained in part by the fact that the Turkish army was the primary advocate of good relations with Israel, and the cooling of relations with Israel figured in his efforts to weaken the army in the internal arena in Turkey.

2013 was a turning point for Erdogan and his supporters. The Gezi Park protests began in May and spread throughout Turkey. Although the protests originated in an environmental issue of preventing the destruction of a park in Istanbul, they rapidly turned into a cry against the abandonment of reforms designed to promote Turkish democracy. The rift between the Gulen movement and Erdogan and the AKP also became public that year when Gulen and his supporters in the police and the legal system exposed widespread corruption linked to Erdogan’s family and close supporters (Barkey, 2020, p. 152). Gulen’s organization has since become the main enemy of the government, which refers to it as FETO—the Fethullah Terrorist Organization, and portrays it as linked to Turkey’s enemies in both the domestic and international arenas.

Erdogan had a growing need for partners in order to change the governmental system in Turkey from a parliamentary regime to a
presidential regime. First, he supported the peace process with the Kurdish minority in Turkey. This period featured political reforms that included, inter alia, collective reforms to the Kurdish minority, such as television broadcasts in the Kurdish language. One of the objectives of these measures was gaining the support of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the pro-Kurdish political party in Turkey, for Erdogan’s political reforms. The peace process ran into difficulties, however, in part because the Arab upheaval strengthened Kurdish nationalism, and because the pro-Kurdish party became stronger politically inside Turkey. Referring to Erdogan in the campaign preceding the June 2015 parliamentary elections, the party’s co-chairman, Selahattin Demirtas, said, “We won’t let you become president (with executive power),” thereby making it clear that his party would not help change the governmental system in Turkey in the direction that Erdogan wanted. In addition, the HDP’s success in passing the 10 percent election threshold, which no other pro-Kurdish political party had previously done, thanks to a more moderate message aimed also at non-Kurdish groups, while the AKP lost its majority in parliament, was also a milestone.

Erdogan’s decision to hold elections again in November 2015 resulted in the AKP regaining its parliamentary majority. Fear of another electoral loss in the future and a resulting need for a coalition partner, however, began to affect Erdogan’s policy, including his previously conciliatory attitude toward the Kurds. While talks between Turkey and the Syrian branch of the Kurdish underground took place early in the Arab upheaval, these were discontinued after 2015. This group was portrayed as a threat to Turkey, despite a Kurdish promise that there would be no Kurdish terrorist operations against Turkey from Syrian territory.

For Erdogan, the unsuccessful coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016 was a clear indication of the existing internal danger to his rule. Erdogan and his supporters believed that the coup was organized by forces outside Turkey who regarded the strengthening of Turkey under the AKP as a threat to be contained. The belief that the United States was one of the parties behind the attempted coup further fanned the flames of the already widespread anti-American feeling in Turkish society. The long time that passed before the US administration and other Western countries congratulated Erdogan for thwarting the attempted coup merely intensified Ankara’s bitterness toward these countries. One of the regional players perceived by Ankara as a backer of the failed coup was the United Arab Emirates, which can help explain the deterioration in relations between Turkey and most of the Arab Gulf states. At the same time, Russia and Iran were not only among the first to congratulate Erdogan for overcoming the attempted coup, but were also not perceived as posing the same threat to the stability of the regime in Turkey as the alleged threat from the West and the Sunni countries.

The conflict between Erdogan and Gulen has had complex effects on relations between the government and the army. On the one hand, the Turkish army has been weakened by a period of harsh purges. On the other hand, Erdogan has become closer to military figures, including some who were convicted in the major trials early in the past decade and were subsequently released. Some have suggested that the real motive for Turkey’s first military intervention in northern Syria in August 2016 and the succeeding interventions was to keep the Turkish army busy, so that it would not constitute a threat on the domestic level, and would be appeased by the room for action given it.

In the campaign for the referendum on constitutional changes in 2017, a coalition began to emerge between the AKP and the
Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) (Stein, 2020, pp. 178-179). This coalition continued in the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2018, and has lasted since. The change to a presidential system also created a situation in which Erdogan needs more than 50 percent of the votes in order to win the presidential elections on the first round. He managed to do this in both the 2014 and 2018 elections, but wants to achieve a victory in the 2023 election as well, especially in light of the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Turkish Republic. In order to maintain this coalition, Erdogan must pursue a more nationalist policy than during his first decade in office. His policy on the Middle East also reflects the coalition between the AKP and the MHP: an uncompromising attitude toward the Kurdish underground in Syria and northern Iraq, the Cyprus issue, and Greece.

Erdogan’s success in consolidating his presidential regime has furthered the centralization trends in government, and has weakened elements in the public system that could have contributed to a more moderate foreign policy. Particularly prominent is the waning status of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IISS, 2020, p. v). The centralization features not only the weakening of the older Turkish institutions, but also direct negotiations by Erdogan with leaders of other countries. The phenomenon was especially prominent during the Trump administration, when phone calls between Erdogan and Trump in effect constituted the main dialogue between their two countries. The end of Davutoglu’s term as Prime Minister in 2016, after which he became an open political rival of Erdogan by founding his own political party in 2019, the Future Party, contributed to the abandonment of a policy emphasizing soft power and a return to a policy emphasizing hard power.

From an economic standpoint, the first decade of Erdogan’s rule featured impressive growth, with per capita GDP more than tripling. Part of this growth was based on liberalization and privatization processes in the 1980s and 1990s, which gave rise to a new class of businessmen (Kirisci, 2009, p. 38). Erdogan actually owes part of his success to the business elite that sprang up in central Anatolia. Due to its traditional values, this elite gave Erdogan and his party enthusiastic support, both economically and politically. The expansion of the Turkish economy required access to new markets and greater integration in the global economy. For example, Turkish trade with Middle East countries soared. The growth of Turkish Airlines also served as a means of promoting Turkish foreign policy. By utilizing a liberal visa regime, the expansion of Turkish Airlines activity facilitated a substantial increase in the number of tourists visiting Turkey (Selcuk, 2013, p. 183), including from Middle East countries.

Turkish per capita GDP has declined since 2013 (Aliriza & Yekler, 2019), and additional data raise doubts about the degree to which Turkish economic growth in the first decade of AKP rule was based on sustainable growth engines, rather than cheap loans and private growth. The steep drop in the value of the Turkish lira—over 40 percent in 2018 and 30 percent since January 2020 (Yilmaz, 2020)—likewise point to fundamental problems in the Turkish economy. Acts like the appointment of Berat Albayrak, Erdogan’s son-in-law, as finance minister in 2018 and the imposition of restrictions on the Turkish central bank’s freedom of action are further such indications of this. Nor is it clear what measures necessary to heal the Turkish economy have been taken. Nevertheless, the governor of the central bank was replaced in November 2020 and a new minister of finance was appointed, and these measures are likely to restore some confidence in the economic policy. Shining the spotlight on foreign policy, especially military operations likely to arouse a patriotic response in Turkey, can compensate in part for the public relations damage suffered by the AKP as a result of the government’s economic mismanagement. Some of the operations that Turkey has conducted beyond its borders can
also potentially benefit Turkish companies, above all construction companies, which can play a role in reconstruction efforts that will be needed in countries with civil wars, such as Syria and Libya.

Another internal issue affecting Turkish foreign policy is refugees from Syria. Turkey hosts 3.6 million refugees from Syria, who arrived after the upheaval in Syria began in 2011. Turkish public opinion was initially sympathetic to “guests” from Syria. As their stay in Turkey lengthened, however, and the economic situation in Turkey worsened, public opinion turned against the refugees (Kiniklioglu, 2020), and most of the public does not favor granting Turkish citizenship to a large number of refugees. Since the European Union is also trying to prevent more refugees from reaching its territory, Ankara is striving to return the refugees to territory under its control in northern Syria. Repatriation of refugees is hence one of the grounds cited by Turkey to justify Operation Peace Spring, which began in October 2019. It is also the basis for Turkey’s opposition to the conquest of Idlib by Assad’s forces, out of concern that a new wave of refugees will begin.

The Ideological Factor: Between Political Islam and Nationalistic Impulse

Turkish foreign policy has undergone an ideological process that clearly accelerated following the failed coup in 2016, with political Islam playing an important role in this process. Erdogan is not the first Turkish leader to give Islam a more central role in his country’s politics. After he successfully eliminated or greatly weakened elements opposed to him, however, especially those perceived as guardians of the secular Turkish model—the military and the judiciary—he enjoyed enormous freedom of action, which he utilized in order to promote an agenda with a distinct Islamic slant.

Although the growing use of religious symbols in Turkey’s public sphere is felt primarily within the country itself, a similar process occurred in Turkey’s foreign policy. Erdogan uses Islamist terminology increasingly in his political speeches, including in the international theater. In recent years, he has exploited the relative passivity of other countries in the region, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to position Turkey as a defender of the interests of Muslims all over the world. Erdogan invested great efforts in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation when Turkey chaired the organization’s summit. In 2016-2019—which included the United States recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital—the Turkish president organized three summits in his country (an unusually large number), and portrayed himself as the chief opponent of a measure that was regarded as injurious to Muslims.

Indeed, Jerusalem has become the best example of the Islamic dimension in Turkish foreign policy. Erdogan misses few opportunities to mention the city, both in speeches to Turkish audiences and in statements in international forums, such as the UN General Assembly. In a narrative combining Ottoman nostalgia with safeguarding the rights of Muslims, the Turkish President uses the issue of Jerusalem to appeal to Muslims both inside and outside Turkey. In this case, the Turkish government’s efforts are not confined to speeches; it invests resources in bolstering its presence in East Jerusalem through various institutions, as well as through affiliated NGOs (al-Burai, 2020).

The use of Turkish government institutions in the exercise of soft power based on Islam is underway in various spheres. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) has become an important player in Turkish foreign policy
involving many countries, mainly in Africa and Europe (Ozturk & Sozeri, 2018).

The Islamic theme in Turkey’s foreign policy is also visible in its choice of allies. Under Erdogan’s rule, Turkey forged closer relations with Qatar (Bedkit, 2020), and the Turkish government is an important supporter of the global Muslim Brotherhood movement (Tur, 2019). After el-Sisi gained power in Egypt, Istanbul became a center for the Egyptian opposition (Ayyash, 2020) and a haven for Hamas leaders (Pitel & Srivastava, 2020). Ankara also supports Islamist groups fighting against the Assad regime in Syria. Following years of suspicion about ties between Turkey and jihad organizations in Syria, including ISIS, and cooperation with Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly a branch of al-Qaeda, recent Turkish activity has been conducted in the framework of a formal alliance with the Syrian National Army (formerly known as the Free Syrian Army)—an association of local Islamist militias. In addition, in the Libyan conflict, Erdogan backs the Government of National Accord, which is supported by the Muslim Brotherhood. These processes—the narrative of Turkish foreign policy, how Erdogan positions himself in the regional balance of forces, and Ankara’s selection of its allies—have prompted many to regard Turkey as the standard bearer of political Islam in the Middle East, or as the head of the Islamist camp in the region. However, while there is some supporting evidence for this view, it should be regarded with skepticism.

First of all, the use of the term “camp” to describe the network of players cooperating with Turkey is doubtful. There is at least some ideological agreement, accompanied by cooperation between these players, but it is questionable to what extent this cooperation is motivated by ideology, and to what extent Ankara is merely using political Islam in order to acquire regional allies, first and foremost, for the purpose of promoting Turkish national interests, and to a far lesser extent, for promoting common interests. In a number of cases, it appears that Turkey is the main decision maker in this camp, and that its decisions are aimed more at its own benefit than at furthering political Islam in the region, as in the cases in which Turkey has shifted forces from one theater to another.

Moreover, the Islamic narrative is not the only line that Erdogan uses when speaking about foreign policy. The Turkish government adopts a “classic” revisionist line when it speaks in international forums and with countries like Russia and Venezuela (Oner, 2020). Erdogan is highly critical of the existing global order, UN institutions, and especially the veto power granted to the five permanent Security Council members. This criticism has been sounded in many of Erdogan’s speeches in international forums, including at the UN General Assembly in 2016, where he stated, “The world is bigger than five”—a statement that has become a slogan in Turkish foreign policy (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 2018). With its NATO allies, on the other hand, Ankara employs a narrative that stresses shared traditional Western values and obedience to international law. This demonstrates the ability of Turkish personalities to adapt their narrative to their audience, especially in the international theater. Political Islam is only one of the ideological frameworks displayed in Turkish speeches.

At the same time, two processes have reduced the weight of political Islam in Turkish foreign policy. The first is the conflict between Erdogan and Gulen, which reached a peak following the attempted coup in 2016, and which has also affected the style of Turkish foreign policy. The Turkish Islamist policy relied to a large extent on Gulen’s institutions, whose
reach extended throughout the Islamic world. After the two allies became enemies, the Turkish government changed its attitude toward the Gulen network, and exerted pressure aimed at either taking over or closing down its institutions (Angey, 2018). Turkey thereby lost an important diplomatic tool that operated in the name of Islam.

The second domestic Turkish process that reduced the influence of political Islam on Turkish foreign policy was Davutoglu’s resignation in May 2016. Davutoglu was the architect of the “zero problems” policy, which contained a strong Islamic element (Ozkan, 2014). In the Turkish political system, in which authority is concentrated among a limited group of people, elements at the individual level wield great influence in the decision making process, and personnel changes can have a significant political influence. In this case, Davutoglu’s resignation also signaled a new direction in Turkish diplomacy.

These internal Turkish changes, together with disappointments in Turkey caused by the Arab upheaval, had the effect of weakening political Islam and strengthening nationalistic tendencies in decision making on foreign affairs in Ankara. The Turkish military operations against the Kurdish underground in northern Iraq and northern Syria and the increased Turkish activity in the Eastern Mediterranean, in accordance with the “Blue Homeland doctrine” (Gingeras, 2020), which holds that Turkey should expand its maritime borders to the greatest possible extent and defend them accordingly, are prominent examples of the processes stemming from an nationalist and not an Islamic policy.

A trend toward strengthening the nationalist aspects of Turkish foreign policy is therefore visible. This trend comes in part at the expense of political Islam, which has lost some of the importance it enjoyed during Davutoglu’s tenure, although it has not completely disappeared. The shift from political Islam to a more nationalistic tone as a major ideological factor in foreign policy did not result in any drastic change in foreign policy (Haugom, 2019), and the processes that began in the name of political Islam have generally been recycled with a justification based on Turkish national interests. The increased emphasis on nationalistic rhetoric at the expense of political Islam, however, makes it possible to understand why the President’s foreign policy wins popularity beyond his traditional base of support.

Conclusion

The geopolitical changes resulting from the Arab upheaval and the internal trends in Turkey since 2013 have led Erdogan to create an amalgam that is unique in Turkish history. From the Turkish Republic’s foreign policy, he has adopted nationalism, militarization, and suspicion toward the rest of the world. From the Ottoman past, he has assimilated the religious dimension, the element of territorial expansion, and revision of the status quo. The relative weight of these various components varies, determined by context. For this reason, Turkish foreign policy also moves in less predictable directions, thereby contributing to regional instability. This in turn feeds a growing sense among the neighboring countries that Ankara poses a threat to them.

Although this article focuses on Turkish policy in the Middle East, Turkey’s ability to project its substantial power in other regions distinguishes current Turkish policy from the policy that prevailed in the early decades of the Turkish Republic. The same is true of other countries in the region, but this should nevertheless alarm regional actors. Ankara has established military bases in other countries, chief among them in Qatar and Somalia. In addition, while it was correct for many years to regard Turkey as an actor whose objective was to maintain the status quo, there are growing indications that Turkey has become a revisionist country. Turkey’s actions in northern Syria and northern Iraq, for example, show
that while Ankara claims to be respecting the territorial borders of those countries, in practice it is undermining their sovereignty over considerable sections of their respective territories.

The changes in Turkish foreign policy could have long term effects, especially on Turkey’s relations with Western countries and pro-US countries in the Middle East. If Erdogan leaves the political scene, it is doubtful whether this will lead to a reversal of all of the changes that have occurred, but it will nevertheless create more room for public discussion, and facilitate a deeper assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of Turkey’s estrangement from its traditional allies than some of the current thinking in Ankara. At the same time, even if a different political party gains power in Turkey, thereby reducing the importance of the Islamic dimension, the nationalist impulse, which is shared by many players in Turkey, is liable to continue shaping the country’s policy after Erdogan leaves the scene. Some of the measures taken by Turkey in recent years may well continue in the post-Erdogan era (Erdemir & Kowalski, 2020b).

Turkey’s activist policy in the Middle East in recent decades came to a great extent at the expense of its relations with Israel, which are at low tide. The crisis in Turkey’s relations with Egypt, and with some of the Arab Gulf states, has contributed to closer relations between Israel and these countries, and was also among the factors that contributed to the Abraham Accords, reached in August 2020. In the current situation, beyond the existing tension in Israel’s bilateral relations with Turkey, Israel is becoming part of the Sunni internal struggle. Although the danger to Israel if the Islamic dimension becomes more dominant in Turkish foreign policy is clear, the risks stemming from a nationalist line in Turkish foreign policy should also be noted, because it puts Turkey on a collision course with some of Israel’s allies, such as Greece and Cyprus. Turkey’s nationalist line also encourages growing Turkish self-reliance and independent production of advanced weapon systems. Even if this does not constitute an immediate direct threat to Israel, these systems could fall into the hands of parties hostile to Israel. On the other hand, if the United States under the Biden administration succeeds in strengthening Turkey’s relations with NATO (a prospect that appears remote), this could help restrain Ankara and reduce its predilection for self-reliance.

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Early in the decade that began with the Arab Spring, the Salafi-jihadist camp led by al-Qaeda was at a low point following the killing of Osama bin Laden and most of the senior leadership. However, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, who succeeded bin Laden, was able to exploit the events of the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria, which he transformed into a new “jihad arena.” The establishment of the Islamic State in 2014 split the Salafi-jihadist bloc into two competing camps; by the end of the decade, after the Islamic State was defeated militarily, the two-headed Salafi-jihadist bloc reached a new low point. Now, however, at its disposal are reservoirs of manpower with combat experience and significant economic assets. Despite the prevalent sense of victory in the West, hundreds of terrorist attacks around the world in 2020 by elements that identify with Salafi-jihadism prove that the camp is alive and functioning. The three decades since the establishment of al-Qaeda, which have seen successive ups and downs in the organization, demonstrate that future Salafi-jihadi activity is eminently possible.

Keywords: Salafi-jihadism, ISIS, al-Qaeda, terrorism, low intensity conflict, Arab Spring
Decade of Vacillation

The years since the outbreak of the Arab Spring events allow us to gain some perspective as to the trends and turning points in the camp identified with Salafi-jihadism. Overall, the camp led by al-Qaeda began the decade of the Arab upheaval at a low point, which stemmed from cumulative damage to the organization’s leadership in targeted killings by the United States—first and foremost the killing of its founder and legendary leader Osama bin Laden, as well as a series of senior commanders. Al-Qaeda, along with its network of alliances, succeeded in recovering from its bleak situation thanks to the upheaval of the Arab Spring, which undermined the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and led to the fall of the leaders who had waged all-out wars against them. In Syria, where a civil war broke out in 2011 and intensified over the years, the Salafi-jihadist camp found a new jihad arena to reawaken the “jihadi spirit” and launch a mass recruitment of numerous volunteers, who flocked to Syria from around the world to experience a holy war. The developing social media played a central role in their recruitment process, and later also in strengthening the power of Salafi-jihadist organizations.

However, the path to revival was far from smooth. Surrounding the camp’s involvement in the war in Syria, al-Qaeda in Iraq (Islamic State in Iraq, or ISI), one of the senior organizations in the alliances that al-Qaeda established over the years, pursued an independent policy, rebelled against the hegemonic standing of al-Qaeda, and rejected the leadership of Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, who succeeded bin Laden. These actions led to the division of the bloc into two competing and hostile camps: one headed by the Islamic State and its allies/subordinates, and the other led by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Thus, from the end of the first half of the decade, Salafi-jihadism, this time under the hegemony of the Islamic State, became a significant and threatening force that influenced international relations in a way that went beyond previous dynamics, when al-Qaeda headed the camp.

Under the cover of the smokescreen created by the Islamic State and the targeted campaign to combat it, which diverted the attention of leaders, publics, resources, and fighting forces, al-Qaeda and its affiliates continued to operate below the radar.

The Islamic State’s capture of extensive territory, the assets that it accumulated, and the danger that it projected due to its territorial expansion and its extreme brutality all led to the establishment of an international coalition in September 2014 intended to defeat it militarily, end its control of the territories it had seized, and prevent the continued existence of a Salafi-jihadist entity in the heart of the Middle East. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and its affiliates took advantage of the temporary respite, after they had been the main target of the international campaign against terrorism—from the September 11 attacks until the establishment of the Islamic State. Under the cover of the smokescreen created by the Islamic State and the targeted campaign to combat it, which diverted the attention of leaders, publics, resources, and fighting forces, al-Qaeda and its affiliates continued to operate below the radar, mainly in peripheral areas in Africa, the Sahel, and Southern Asia, as well as in the Middle East. The overriding goal was to recover, gain strength, and recruit manpower, in order to reestablish their standing and expand their activities to additional theaters of activity (Hoffman, 2018).

At the end of the second decade, the United States and its allies again accelerated their pursuit to eliminate the remainders of the veteran leadership of al-Qaeda and its affiliates who had survived despite the global manhunt. This joined the pursuit of the leaders of the Islamic State and its partners, which led to the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on October 26, 2019 and other senior members of its leadership.
Thus, one decade after the onset of the Arab Spring, the Salafi-jihadist camp, with its bifurcated leadership and its bipolar operational strategy, is again at what appears to be a low point. At the same time, the Salafi-jihadist camp, composed of a wide variety of organizations and activists in different geographical arenas, is inherently dynamic—as it has been, since it appeared at the end of the 1980s and left its mark on the world of terrorism from the end of the 1990s onwards. The camp, which from its beginning was led by al-Qaeda for over two decades, has vacillated between low points and high points over the course of its more than 30 years of existence. The fact that the Salafi-jihadist organizations are currently at a relatively low point has led senior government figures in various countries, especially the United States, to proclaim the defeat of the organizations leading the Salafi-jihadist camp. However, past experience instructs that eulogizing prematurely is dangerous and potentially disastrous.

It seems that the split and the current condition of the two-headed Salafi-jihadist camp does not necessarily indicate its ruin or annul the threat posed by it, its leaders, and its affiliates. Despite the recurrent declines and the current low point of the Salafi-jihadi camp, organizations identified with it have continued to carry out many hundreds of terrorist attacks around the world. The Salafi-jihadi vision and doctrine constitute a conceptual ideological stream that has existed for a long time and reflects the desire of many Muslims to restore the glory of Islam. Nevertheless, their number of operatives among the overall Muslim population in the world is marginal, and they have not succeeded in galvanizing the majority of young Muslims, because of the violent and extreme jihad that they contend is the sole legitimate path to realize the vision.

A Decade of Salafi-jihadism

The events of the Arab Spring found the Salafi-jihadist camp, with al-Qaeda seen as its undisputed leader and its representative symbol, subject to a global manhunt. Over the course of the decade, after the 9/11 attacks, the United States launched a targeted campaign with the help of its allies that led to the detention and killing of most of the prominent members of the leadership of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The majority were struck by armed unmanned aerial vehicles, usually in their hiding places in the tribal region of Waziristan and in raids and periodic ground operations in various places in the world. Al-Qaeda reached its nadir with the targeted killing of its legendary leader, Osama bin Laden, in May 2011, in a raid by US special forces on his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The death of bin Laden left the organization under the leadership of Zawahiri, who was selected by the organization’s Shura Council. Unlike the charismatic bin Laden, who relied on his unique standing as someone who had taken part in the fighting in Afghanistan, Zawahiri’s leadership was based mainly on his standing as the leader’s deputy, and on his being an Islamic orator.

The conventional wisdom in the West regarding the future of al-Qaeda and the Salafi-jihadi camp was that the upheaval in the Arab world would serve as another serious blow to the organization and its affiliates, and would blunt their power and influence in the Arab and Muslim world: the revolutions in several Arab states that occurred without much bloodshed, and with demands for more democratization, human rights, and equal rights for women, in practice represented ideas and methods opposite of Salafi-jihadist principles. However, the overthrow of autocratic leaders in several key Arab states such as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen, which was long an al-Qaeda goal, was met with satisfaction among the organization’s leaders, even though these events occurred without violent jihad. Bin Laden welcomed these developments, as did Zawahiri, due to their belief that “the work of the righteous is done by others” (Schweitzer & Stern, 2011; Soufan, 2017), and in any case, all is part of a divine plan.
Zawahiri inherited a weakened camp, and sought a way to consolidate his leadership and extricate al-Qaeda and its allies from the crisis that beset them, in context of the revolutionary events in the Middle East. Zawahiri identified that not only were his sworn enemies among the leaders of the Arab states removed in the upheaval, but many of the leaders and activists of veteran Salafi-jihad organizations had fled or were released from imprisonment and found their way back to their organizations, which consequently received significant high-quality reinforcement of their ranks. Furthermore, Zawahiri perceived Syria, where a civil war began in 2011 between Assad and the opposition to his rule, as a country worthy of being the next jihad battlefield. Because it suited his needs, he used it as a lifeline to revive the weakened global jihad camp.

Zawahiri chose to capitalize on the new circumstances that emerged following the upheaval of the Arab Spring. In a speech of July 31, 2013, entitled “46 Years Since the Defeat of the Arab Armies in the 1967 War,” Zawahiri called on young Muslims to come to Syria and fight against Assad, whom he described as a heretic, and promised to liberate Syria and afterwards turn toward Jerusalem to liberate the holy places of occupied Palestine. Thus, al-Qaeda, under its new leader Zawahiri, diverted the organization’s attention and resources toward Syria; senior and veteran operatives were sent there in order to oversee the emerging central jihad arena. This reflected Zawahiri’s fundamental preference of focusing on the “near enemy” in the heart of the Levant over bin Laden’s choice, which was made in the face of the constraints of the bitter reality before him and led him to adhere to a strategy of focusing on the “distant enemy” (Bergen, 2006). But the middle of 2013 saw a watershed, with the greatest impact on the Salafi-jihadist camp over the rest of the decade, and led to a rift in al-Qaeda’s system of alliances and to the division of the camp.

The organization al-Qaeda in Iraq, which in 2006 changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), continued the independent and autonomous tradition instilled in it by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, its founding leader, who to a large extent ignored the policy outlined by bin Laden and Zawahiri. Zarqawi was killed in 2006. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was named head of the organization in 2010 after Zarqawi’s successors were killed, also pursued an independent and autonomous policy vis-à-vis Zawahiri. This policy was encouraged by senior and veteran members of Saddam Hussein’s Baath regime, who were imprisoned with him in the Bucca detainment camp when the United States was in Iraq, and later joined the organization (Reuter, 2015).

The overthrow of autocratic leaders in several key Arab states such as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen, which was long an al-Qaeda goal, was met with satisfaction among the organization’s leaders, even while occurring without violent jihad.

Against the backdrop of the consolidation of a Shiite government in Baghdad, especially under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who adopted a particularly discriminatory policy toward the Sunni minority and its government representatives following the United States withdrawal in 2011, ISI exploited the weakness of the Shiite regime and the alienation of the Sunni population to consolidate its standing in the tribal regions in western Iraq. Alongside events in Iraq, the organization also capitalized on the Assad regime’s weakened control in northeastern Syria to send its people to entrench itself in Syria. Thus, al-Baghdadi decided on his own to unify al-Nusra Front, the branch of al-Qaeda in Syria—led by Mohammad al-Julani, a Syrian who had fought with Baghdadi in Iraq and was sent to lead the branch in Syria— with his organization in Iraq, and called the unified organization ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, the name of “Greater Syria”). Because this action was not done with the agreement and prior approval of Zawahiri, cracks developed in
the relations between the two, which expanded into a rift and reached the point of a complete divorce between the men and the organizations, and led to the Iraqi organization’s removal from the ranks of al-Qaeda’s system of alliances. This rift, which quickly became an open and bitter conflict between the camps, split the global jihad current into a bifurcated stream.

And so, in June 2014, ISIS’s spokesperson announced the establishment of the Islamic State (this time without identifying its name with a specific territory) and the appointment of al-Baghdadi as caliph. This ostensibly determined al-Baghdadi’s standing as hegemon not only in the Salafi-jihadist camp, thus also above Zawahiri, but in the entire Muslim world, as the successor of the Prophet Muhammad.

Under Caliph al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State aimed to consolidate an independent state that would lead to the establishment of a global Islamic caliphate, and worked to consolidate its control of the territory that it had seized and where it imposed sharia law (tamkin). The Islamic State’s promise of immediate realization of the Islamic caliphate in the heart of the Arab Levant and the restoration of Islam’s former glory attracted tens of thousands of volunteers to its ranks. These new recruits came from over 100 countries (Clapper, 2016), including Arab countries, led by Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, and over 5,000 volunteers from Western countries, especially France, the UK, Germany, Belgium, Scandinavian countries (primarily Sweden and Denmark), and Turkey, as well as from central Asia—Chechens (especially from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) and Uyghurs from China (Soufan Group, 2015). The Islamic State took over important cities like Mosul in Iraq (2014-2017) and Raqqqa (2014-2017) and Deir ez-Zor (2014-2019) in Syria, along with many other towns and villages. At its prime, it controlled a territory the size of England, with 8 million residents. The Islamic State was characterized by unusual cruelty, and diffused horror and terror among its population and enemies in war around the world with acute acts of terrorism. Under the slogan “alive and expanding,” Salafi-jihadism led by the Islamic State became a clear and present danger to the regional order in the Middle East, and even a global threat. It made sophisticated and professional use of social media to build up its image of strength, in order to attract new volunteers into its ranks and instill fear and trembling in the hearts of its adversaries. Later it also used social media for the recruitment, training, and encouragement of self-initiated terrorist activities under its inspiration.

The increasing threat and danger posed by the Islamic State prompted the mobilization of an international coalition in September 2014 led by the United States, which included over 70 countries. The purpose of the coalition was to obstruct the group’s progress and defeat it militarily, and liberate the extensive territory it had seized and the populations subjected to a regime of terrorism and sharia-inspired coercion. After a bloody five-year campaign, the Islamic State was militarily defeated and lost its control and its governance in the heart of the Arab Levant with the fall of its last military stronghold in Baghuz in northeastern Syria.

Despite the military defeat of the Islamic State, the ISIS organization, which was the backbone and the basis for the establishment of the caliphate, remains, with an estimated 14-18 thousand fighters in the Middle East, and thousands more fighters that belong to its allies around the world. They have renewed their oath of allegiance to the new leader of ISIS, Amir Mohammed Saeed Abdul Rahman al-Mawli, known as Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, who was appointed after the assassination of al-Baghdadi on October 26, 2019 in the village of Barisha, north of the city of Idlib.

Thus, notwithstanding the shock of the military defeat and the shattering of the promised dream professed by Caliph al-Baghdadi of imminently establishing a new Islamic empire, since the collapse of the Islamic State, twelve “provinces” of the camp remain and continue to operate as partners of ISIS and carry out hundreds of attacks each year around the world, especially in Syria and Iraq as well as
in Afghanistan, Sinai, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The organization retains enormous monetary reserves from its time in power, as a result of the Islamic State’s trade in oil and raw materials, bank robberies and thefts of archaeological treasures, taxes and extortion, and ransom payments that it received from the kidnapping of both foreigners and locals.

Al-Qaeda has also succeeded in strengthening its ranks with new recruits. Early in the previous decade, al-Qaeda enjoyed a foothold in the Middle East, especially in Syria, through its offshoot organization, al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra), which swore allegiance to Zawahiri, but over the years distanced itself from al-Qaeda and changed its name twice, to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and later to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. The goal was to express its separation from the Salafi-jihadist camp and the international terrorist image that clings to al-Qaeda’s partners, and it preferred to wage a local campaign with Syrian national characteristics against the Assad regime. Thus, the organization Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham separated from the al-Qaeda network, and today the organization retains a local ally in Syria named Hurras ad-Din. Al-Qaeda’s main power is now in the Middle East outskirts, the Sahel and the Maghreb, northern Africa, eastern Africa, and Afghanistan.

The veteran leadership of al-Qaeda, which was based on those who participated in the campaign against Russia in Afghanistan, has dwindled over the past two years due to the renewal of the United States’ targeted campaign against its leaders. The status of Zawahiri, the organization’s leader, is unclear. There are reports, not confirmed by the organization, that he died recently from a serious illness, or that he is in his final days for health reasons. The elimination of the senior leadership, especially in Syria and Iran (the last of which, Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, who was considered one of the organization’s three leaders, was killed in Tehran in November 2020) has left Saif al-Adel, a former Egyptian officer and explosives expert who held a series of senior positions in al-Qaeda and is a member of the Shura Council, as the natural candidate to lead the organization after the departure of Zawahiri, in order to maintain unity and retain hegemony in its system of alliances. Al-Qaeda’s ability to continue to lead the decentralized and autonomous camp lies to a large extent in experienced leadership that is accepted by the organization’s members and partners, especially given the fact that al-Qaeda, which relies to a great extent on its allies and affiliates, has suffered two revolts over the past decade, from al-Qaeda in Iraq (ISI) and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham in Syria, and given the challenges of the coming decade.

Conclusion

In the current unfolding decade, the Salafi-jihadist organizations are in a challenging period of decline under a leadership that is divided, dwindling, hostile, and competing for hegemony in the global jihadist camp. They remain with the trauma of the stinging military defeat inflicted by the West and their Arab coalition partners, and the shattered dream of establishing the Islamic caliphate that will not be realized in the near future. At the same time, the organizations have new reserves of manpower at their disposal, many imbued with Salafi-jihadist indoctrination and with a wealth of combat experience. Possible additional reinforcement lies with the thousands of potential fighters and their family members who remain in the Idlib area, in the detainment camps, and in the al-Hol refugee camp in northeastern Syria. There has also been an increase in the economic resources at their disposal, their infrastructure in peripheral areas has been expanded, and the terrorist activity that they undertake regularly in various places in the world has not ceased. Each year saw hundreds of terrorist and guerrilla actions around the world, including mass-casualty suicide attacks in which the Salafi-jihadist organizations play a dominant role. For example, in 2020 alone, Salafi-jihadists carried out over 120 suicide attacks in 16 countries that took the lives of
It appears that the recurring rise and fall of the Salafi-jihadist organizations over the past few decades shows that the West’s victory proclamations, along with its dismissal of Salafi-jihadism, are premature and overly optimistic.

Despite the victory rhetoric by senior government officials, mainly Americans, regarding the imminent defeat of al-Qaeda, along with completing the mission of defeating the Islamic State and continuing the campaign against ISIS, it appears that the recurring rise and fall of the Salafi-jihadist organizations over the past few decades shows that the West’s victory proclamations, along with its dismissal of Salafi-jihadism, are premature and overly optimistic. This is especially true when the Salafi-jihadist organizations and individuals acting under their inspiration see their struggle as an ongoing campaign in which the periodic setbacks are a divine attempt to test their faith and their perseverance, and believe that their certain victory will ultimately come—as declared in al-Baghdadi’s last speech on September 16, 2019, a month before he was killed, “And he said: you shall do!” The COVID-19 pandemic has even strengthened and consolidated their belief that their adversaries, who considered themselves invincible, have felt the heavy hand of God and proven to be a paper tiger, and their defeat is inevitable.

From the standpoint of the new decade, it is difficult to foresee the rise of a new Salafi-jihadist entity in the near future on a scale that the Islamic State reached at its prime. The possibility of the return of a new and threatening Salafi-jihadist challenge on a global level depends to a great extent on the existence of geopolitical circumstances, internal weakness of failed regimes that are unable to govern portions of their territory, acute economic crises, severe ethnic and religious discrimination, and the growth of charismatic leaders, which could—all or some of these factors—converge to ignite a chain of events that could give rise to another jihad campaign. The basic conditions in the areas where the Salafi-jihadist organizations operate are difficult, ruled by oppressive authoritarian regimes in ungovernable areas rife with bribery and poverty. These conditions have worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and presumably there is a potential for the recruitment of new volunteers to continue the jihad against their heretical enemies.

Among the public in the West, there is apparently a sense of relief following the defeat of the Islamic State and the declarations that al-Qaeda has been vanquished. While the scope and intensity of attacks in Western countries has decreased in recent years, and those that have been carried out have been the actions of individuals and small cells operating under the inspiration of the Salafi-jihadist idea and mainly at their own initiative, and only in a few cases under direct guidance, this does not indicate the complete abandonment of the campaign against the “distant enemy.” The West remains a hated adversary that is malevolent toward the Muslims and the Salafi-jihadist organizations,
regardless of which camp they belong to. The term “loyalty and renunciation” (al-wala’ wa-l-barā‘) is a guiding order to harm everyone who is not Muslim, in other words, an enemy that must be attacked (Wagemakers, 2009).

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References


Notes

1 The high and low points of Salafi-jihadism: Al-Qaeda appeared in the late 1980s, and early in the 1990s was an unknown organization that operated anonymously as an accomplice and funder of terrorism. By the end of the 1990s, it gained momentum with the attacks on the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998) and on the USS Cole in Yemen (2000), and achieved its “crowning glory” with the September 11, 2001 attacks. This decade began at an apex and ended with the low point that al-Qaeda reached in 2011; the second decade, which began at a low point, peaked in the middle of the decade and ultimately descended to its current nadir.

2 In an op-ed in the Washington Post, Christopher Miller, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, declared that the war against al-Qaeda was close to completion (Miller, 2020). See also a discussion between Peter Bergen and Ambassador Nathan Sales, who serves as the counterterrorism coordinator in the State Department, at a conference held by the Soufan Center on November 16-19, 2020. For the conference, see https://globalsecurityforum.com/#. To view the discussion between the two, see also: Global Security Forum. Fireside Chat ‘An Overview of the Global Terrorist Threat’ Amb. Nathan Sales, Peter Bergen. YouTube, November 17, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu389Mdf-JY.

3 There are 78 members of the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS led by the United States. See https://www.state.gov/the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-partners/.

4 This estimate appears in the report by the Lead Inspector General submitted to the US Congress in August 2019 (Schmitt et al., 2019). For more information, see https://bit.ly/2YEvwZf.

5 There are five official members of al-Qaeda’s network of alliances: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS); al-Shabaab in Somalia; and Hurras ad-Din in Syria.

6 As part of the global expansion, the Islamic State declared its presence beyond its activity base in Iraq and Syria in the form of “provinces.” ISIS’s official provinces today are: Iraq, Syria, Khorasan, Sinai, West Africa, Central Africa, East Asia, Algeria, Pakistan, India, Somalia, and Turkey.

Toward a New “Solution”? Islamic Ideologies in the Middle East a Decade after the Uprisings

Dov Dell and Sarah Feuer

In an area riven by a decade of war, political shockwaves, and identity crises, it appears that the dominant Islamic factions operating in the Middle East—Sunni and Shiite, moderate and extremist, establishment and revolutionary—have reached a physical and ideological nadir. This downturn is evident despite the fact that at some point or another since the upheaval of the Arab Spring, each of these strands identified an opportunity to leverage its vision and translate it into political, military, economic, and cognitive gains. This paper analyzes key developments affecting four particular streams of Islamic thought from the upheaval up to the eve of the coronavirus outbreak: Sunni political Islam (mainly the Muslim Brotherhood and its proxies), establishment Sunni Islam, Salafi-jihadism, and Shiite Islam. The paper concludes with a discussion of possible future scenarios.

Keywords: Islam, ideology, Iran, political Islam, Shiite Islam, Salafi-jihadi
Introduction: Ideological Confusion among Islamic Movements a Decade after the Arab Spring

This article examines the evolution of the main streams of Islamic thought in the Middle East over the past decade: Sunni political Islam (particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and its proxies), establishment Sunni Islam, Salafi-jihadism, and Shiite Islam. The main argument is that in an area riven by a decade of civil wars, political shockwaves, and identity crises, it appears that all the Islamic factions operating in the space—Sunni and Shiite, moderate and extreme, establishment and revolutionary—have reached a physical and ideological nadir. This downturn is evident despite the fact that at some point or another since the upheaval, each of these strands identified an opportunity to leverage its vision and translate it into political, military, economic, and cognitive gains. This paper analyzes the most important changes in these four streams from the upheaval to the eve of the COVID-19 outbreak in the region.

Apart from the particular features of the respective ideological movements and the ups and downs each has weathered over the years, they have all confronted a number of common challenges, among them:

a. A widening gap between the Islamic ideological offering and public demand, partly as a result of the strengthening of individual identity at the expense of group identities (religious, national, ethnic, tribal). The groups that led the protests a decade ago were mainly youth who were exposed to Western culture and wanted to adopt at least some of its daily practices, if not all of its ideas. Most of these youth put themselves (their ego, or “the individual”) rather than the collective at the center. Consequently, the gap between the problems on the ground faced by the public and the solutions offered by the religious leaders (who usually emphasize the community of believers) has grown.

b. A generational shift and the disappearance of the last “great enlightened ones.” None of the Islamic streams have so far succeeded in bringing to the fore young religious leaders who combine charisma with expertise and scholarship, and who can step into the shoes of an older generation of thinkers and religious arbiters and lead the community of believers.

In an area riven by a decade of civil wars, political shockwaves, and identity crises, it appears that all the Islamic factions operating in the space—Sunni and Shiite, moderate and extreme, establishment and revolutionary—have reached a physical and ideological nadir.

In the circles of political Islam, for example, the Egyptian Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, considered by many to be a dominant religious arbiter in the Sunni world, has reached the age of 94 without an heir, certainly not of his stature. In the realm of establishment Islam, Sheikh Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz, who prior to his death in 1999 was the head of the Wahhabi movement and the former chief mufti of Saudi Arabia, was considered one of the greatest Sunni clerics of the previous century. In contrast, his successor Abd al-Aziz al-Sheikh (now in office) does not enjoy the personal prestige of his predecessor and has difficulty resisting pressure, from the regime and from the public, to institute reforms in the country. Among the jihadists, al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri (who is rumored to have died recently) is considered a creative and innovative thinker, but in recent years lost influence after struggling to fill the leadership and operational void left by his predecessor and longtime partner, Osama bin Laden. The killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019 weakened the ISIS brand without restoring the status of al-Qaeda. And in the Shiite world, the historical move from Khomeini, the idealist and all-powerful leader whose position was tailored to his
stature, to Khamenei, his inferior in every way (personal prestige, religious scholarship, juridical authority, and political power) is particularly striking, and when the time comes, Khamenei’s heir will likely be more of a religious politician and less of a marja taqlid (a scholarly cleric to be followed).

c. Difficulty competing with the flood of content made possible by technology. The instant access to information and content from all over the world by a young, technologically savvy public requires the Muslim faithful (like all religious groups) to adjust and adapt, but in many respects that adaptation has not occurred. Apart from ISIS, which in large measure built itself by exploiting this technological reality (which explains much of its international resonance and the opposition it aroused), most of the Islamic factions have not yet entered the arena of the core cognitive struggle for the minds of the public in the Middle East.

d. The experience and growing sense of failure in translating vision into reality. This has been evidenced by four decades of the “revolution” in Iran, more than a decade of Hamas rule in Gaza, the destruction left by the Islamic State, and growing Western superiority in the face of the accelerating decline of the Islamic world (contrary to the ancient prophecies of a reversal of this trend). Sometimes the sense of failure is so strong that it obscures a more balanced reality. For example, in the case of the brief Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt, the political and economic damage the group caused is perceived by Egyptian public opinion, with the active encouragement of the Sisi regime, as far more dramatic than it actually was. Consequently, the chaotic period between the removal of Mubarak and the rise of el-Sisi is identified above all with the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, if and when the Muslim Brotherhood wishes to return to the political arena in Egypt, it will have to breach the barrier of negative public opinion, one it did not face in 2012.

And yet, in spite of all the challenges—both individual and shared—that have forced Islamic movements into a crisis of thought and an ideological maelstrom, Islam still has the power to attract in the Middle East of today. The democratic-secular-civil alternative that various circles in the region entertained at the start of the previous decade has not materialized (except perhaps in the case of Tunisia, and even there the processes of change are still just beginning). The public demonstrations that returned in 2019 (in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, and to a lesser extent, Jordan) have not yet managed to offer an alternative to the more familiar centralized-sectarian-religious structures. How the various Islamic strands of thought navigate the multiple crises confronting the region in the coming years will affect the evolving role of religion in the Middle East in the longer term.

1. Sunni Political Islam since the Upheaval: Down but not Out

Since the defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013, the regional camp that includes the various factions of Sunni political Islam has been plagued with organizational division and a lack of ideological unity. The Egyptian movement and its proxies abroad have been embroiled in internal debates and schisms largely stemming from disagreements over the use of force, the justification for violence, and the importance of the supra-national Muslim identity relative to particular national identities and issues. The weakening of this camp has also been reflected in declining public support, although it retains a faithful base of supporters among Arab populations.

The Situation in Egypt

The current predicament of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt stems from the events of 2013, when the military revolt that brought down...
the government of Mohamed Morsi prompted a severe repression of the movement. Following the dispersal of demonstrators in Cairo’s Rabaa and al-Nahda squares in August 2013 (in which 800 activists were killed), some 40,000 members of the movement were imprisoned. Out of 21 members of the Guidance Office, only six remained free by the end of the year, and three of them fled the country (Ranko & Yaghi, 2019).

These events caused a split in the movement into two broad factions (both of which nonetheless continued to accept the leadership of Muhammad Badia, the General Guide). The first group was led by remnants of the pre-2013 leadership, including Acting General Guide Mahmoud Azzat (who was arrested by the Egyptian regime in August 2020), Secretary-General Mahmoud Hussein (who is now in Turkey), and international secretary Ibrahim Munair (who is in London). This group, which controls most of the organization’s assets worldwide, argues that the security situation in Egypt precludes internal elections for the time being. The second group was established in 2014 under the leadership of three figures: Muhammad Taha Wahdan (imprisoned in 2015), Ali Batikh (in Turkey since 2015), and Muhammad Kamal (killed in 2016). Following internal elections in 2016, the new group set up an office in Turkey managed by Ahmed Abdulrahman, with apparent responsibility for Muslim Brotherhood affairs outside Egypt.

The split in the Egyptian movement in 2013 was expressed not only in distinctive organizational structures but also ideologically, with a division into two groups with opposing views on the use of force and violence against the regime. For the remnants of the old leadership at the helm of the first group, there is no justification for using force. This was the message of the closing statement of the international conference hosted by Turkey in September 2019, where some 500 members of the Muslim Brotherhood (mostly supporters of the original leadership) gathered in Istanbul. By contrast, the new group argues that the use of force against regime representatives (police, judges, and so on) is justified due to the movement’s oppression by an illegitimate regime.

However, contrary to the jihadi organizations that justify violence against regimes in Muslim countries through the concept of takfir (labeling other Muslims as “infidels”), the breakaway faction of the Muslim Brotherhood has based their arguments on a 2015 fatwa (religious ruling) signed by 150 prominent religious figures, some with prior links to the Muslim Brotherhood and some active in European Muslim organizations known to support the Muslim Brotherhood. The fatwa relies on the concept of retribution against severe repression (qisas), including by destroying symbols of the state. This group has established ties to other militant groups in Egypt, including terror organizations, such that today there is no meaningful distinction between the new Muslim Brotherhood faction and the jihadists in Egypt—notwithstanding doctrinal differences behind the justification of violence (Ranko & Yaghi, 2019).

The Situation in Turkey, Gaza, and Qatar
Outside Egypt, the years 2013–2020 saw the emergence of two main factions within the Sunni political Islamist camp: the first and more cohesive lies in the Turkey-Qatar-Gaza axis, and a second, if less cohesive, group is reflected in the Islamist parties that survived the Arab Spring and continue to participate in the political systems of countries such as Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco. The division between the two factions derives mainly from the relative emphasis they place on the pan-Islamic identity, compared to national identities and domestic concerns. After 2013, the political leadership in Turkey, Qatar, and the Gaza Strip continued to promote traditional principles of the Muslim Brotherhood ideology, either by identifying themselves as belonging to the movement (in the case of Erdogan in Turkey and Hamas in Gaza) or through open support of movements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood across the region (as with Qatar).
In Turkey, the President’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) has over the years spearheaded a process of Islamization of society, mainly by weakening the secular-Kemalist establishment, led by the army, and through reforms in education. Since the fall of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, the Turkish government has become a leading supporter of Sunni Islamist groups in the Middle East, from Hamas in Gaza to the International Union of Muslim Scholars—the Islamist organization with its base in Qatar, which until 2018 was led by Yusuf al-Qaradawi—to the Government of National Accord and its Islamist supporters in Libya, where Turkey dramatically increased its military involvement in early 2020. Turkish support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its proxies was also on display at the international conference that Erdogan hosted in September 2019. Indeed, the slogan of the conference was “The Muslim Brotherhood: Distinguishing the Idea and Continuing the Project,” and the closing statement stressed a commitment to the global Muslim community above any national interest.

Since the fall of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, the Turkish government has become a leading supporter of Sunni Islamist groups in the Middle East.

The same commitment can be identified in the Hamas charter that the organization tried to supplement with a new policy paper in 2017, which maintained the close link between Palestinian identity and the broader Islamic identity (and the Arab-Muslim world in general). Thus, the movement is defined in the policy paper as first and foremost an Islamic movement, and only then a Palestinian national movement, prioritizing the pan-Islamic aspect of the ideology. The new document eliminates the previous reference to the struggle against Israel as a struggle against Judaism, and states instead that “Hamas has no conflict with Jews as Jews, [but] the movement sees the fight as one with the Zionist project and not with the Jews because of their religion.” This formulation is identical to al-Qaradawi’s rhetoric in an interview he gave to al-Jazeera in 2014, in which he argued, “We are not fighting them because they are Semites. We are also Semites…They have made the conflict between us into a religious matter, so we fight religion with religion” (al-Jazeera Mubasher, 2014).

In the same interview (which took place during Operation Protective Edge), al-Qaradawi called for a new intifada in the Palestinian territories and condemned the Arab regimes for their apathy over the Palestinian issue—familiar topics in Islamist discourse for decades. The fact that al-Qaradawi continues to broadcast such interviews from Doha reflects Qatar’s ongoing patronage of Sunni Islamist movements since the upheaval—patronage that partly explains Qatari support for Hamas in recent years (although the Muslim Brotherhood is forbidden to operate within Qatar). In 2018, at the age of 92, al-Qaradawi resigned as head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, and was replaced by Dr. Ahmad Raysuni, a religious leader of Moroccan origin. Raysuni was head of the leading Muslim Brotherhood movement in Morocco, the Movement for Unity and Reform, from 1996 to 2003, when he was forced to resign due to his public opposition to the decision by King Mohammed VI to centralize the process of issuing fatwas in the kingdom. As recently as 2019, when Raysuni was appointed to the Faculty of Sharia and Islamic Studies at Qatar University, he was promoting the idea that expressing doubt about the Holocaust is not only the right of Muslims but their duty. Both Raysuni and al-Qaradawi continue to find platforms to disseminate their claims on Qatari television and radio.

The Situation in Other Countries
In countries where parties with historical roots in the Muslim Brotherhood (for example Morocco, Tunisia, and Jordan) survived the wave of
suppression of the movement from 2013, these parties have limited their ideological emphasis on the pan-Islamic identity, increased their engagement with local issues, and taken steps to separate their political activity from their religious activity. In Morocco, for example, the Justice and Development Party, whose roots are in the Muslim Brotherhood, decided to distance itself officially from the Egyptian movement in 2013. In 2016, Rached Ghannouchi, head of the al-Nahda party in Tunisia, announced that henceforth his party would identify as “a party of Muslim democracy,” relinquish the moniker of “political Islam,” and ask its members who were active in religious circles to give up their political roles.

The splits in 2012-2015 in the Islamic Action Front, the leading Muslim Brotherhood party in Jordan, arose to a large extent from the desire of some parties to put an end to the Muslim Brotherhood’s monopoly on Islamist discourse in the kingdom, and from their wish to prioritize internal political and economic reforms over external matters such as the Palestinian issue. The original Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood movement, which lost official government recognition in 2015, has continued to promise that one day Jordan will become a country within the broader “Islamic caliphate.” In spite of the difficulties that the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan has faced since 2013, there have recently been signs that the government is softening its stance toward the Islamists, in order to divert public anger over unpopular steps (such as the gas deal with Israel), and in an effort to maintain channels of communication with Hamas. Against the background of President Trump’s “deal of the century” and the possibility that Hamas could emerge in a stronger position, the Jordanian regime saw value in setting up a back door channel to the Palestinian Islamist movement. The steps that the regime was forced to take in order to manage the coronavirus crisis led to further tensions with the Muslim Brotherhood, which for many years has dominated the Teachers’ Association and other sectors that were adversely affected by the economic decline due to the pandemic.

The current landscape is thus marked by a central paradox facing the Islamist parties that survived the last decade: the more these organizations renounce their Islamist identity and principles, the more successful they are in capturing positions on the political map of their countries. But whereas the price they paid protected these organizations from government oppression, it has also cost them public support, as growing segments of the populations have either come to associate them with more extremist movements such as ISIS or found it hard to point to what was left of these parties’ original Islamism.

Suni Political Islam in Public Opinion

The decline in public support for political Islam in the region in recent years is charted in opinion polls, although these same surveys indicate divergences (sometimes very significant) between countries. A sample of surveys conducted by the Washington Institute from 2014 to early 2020 (before the coronavirus outbreak) reveals that groups linked to political Islam did indeed lose support over that period (Tables 1-3). In some cases, the decrease was minimal, as in Lebanese, Emirati, and Palestinian support for the Muslim Brotherhood, and Emirati support for Hamas. Notably, support for Hamas in Lebanon has increased dramatically over the years, contrary to all the other countries surveyed (Pollock, 2019). The Lebanese may perhaps perceive Hamas as a partner in the fight against Israel, with this perception reinforced by Operation Protective Edge between Hamas and Israel in 2014.

A decade after the Arab Spring, almost a quarter (on average) of the Arab population in the region support the Muslim Brotherhood.

The data suggest that a decade after the Arab Spring, almost a quarter (on average) of
The Arab population in the region support the Muslim Brotherhood. Support for Hamas hovers around 40 percent on average, likely due to the organization’s image as a leader in the fight against Israel on behalf of the Palestinians, and less because of its Islamist agenda. The most dramatic change occurred in Saudi Arabia, following the regime’s efforts to label the Muslim Brotherhood and associated movements as terror organizations operating contrary to the religion of Islam. These figures suggest that in spite of the difficulties faced by Sunni political Islam in recent years, the stream of thought still enjoys a measure of consistent support. And as the Egyptian case suggests, in spite of the severe repression of the Muslim Brotherhood there, the experience of 2012–2013 will remain in the collective memory of some population groups as an aborted experiment, rather than a failed one. To the extent the coronavirus pandemic has emerged as a critical test for regimes in the region, it seems quite possible that the surviving Sunni Islamist organizations will be among those attempting to exploit the perceived failures of regional leaders to manage the crisis.

### Table 1. Positive and negative attitudes toward the Muslim Brotherhood in the region, 2014/2019

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>-7</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>+9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
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<td>-8</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>+7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>+11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
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<td>11%</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Positive and negative attitudes toward the Muslim Brotherhood in the Palestinian Authority and Gaza, 2018/2020

| Positive 2018 | 38% | 2020* | 37% | Trend | -1 | Negative 2018 | 62% | 2020 | 56% | Trend | -6 |

*The survey was conducted before the coronavirus outbreak

### Table 3. Positive and negative attitudes toward Hamas in countries of the region, 2014/2019

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>-8</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>+7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>-18</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>+18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>34%</td>
<td>-19</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>+19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>-30</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>+31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>+24</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>53%</td>
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2. Establishment Sunni Islam: Attempts at Reform alongside Structural Challenges

Since the start of the regional upheaval in 2011—and particularly in light of the rise (and fall) of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and of ISIS—official, or establishment, Sunni Islam (that is, Islamic institutions belonging to state bodies) has sought to reinforce its legitimacy in the eyes of the public, as part of the regimes’ broader strategies of survival. Several mild but noteworthy shifts emerged in the rhetoric of these institutions over the last decade, including a clear opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, an emphasis on (and preference for) national identity over transnational religious identity, and a promotion of the rights of religious minorities as well as inter-faith initiatives. Certain countries also sought to export a more moderate religious discourse beyond their borders. Case studies from Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia point to efforts by the relevant institutions to present a convincing alternative to Islamic radicalism, but they also reveal the limitations of those efforts.

Establishment Islam in Egypt

Since 2013, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has advocated a process of religious
reform through the official religious institutions, including al-Azhar (the supreme institution of Islamic studies in the Sunni world), the Ministry of Endowments, and Dar al-Iftaa. Following the revolt that brought down the Morsi regime, Sisi sought to extend his control of the religious sphere. In this framework, the regime closed hundreds of unofficial mosques, allowed sermons only by imams who were approved by al-Azhar and the Ministry of Endowments, and tried to standardize the content of Friday sermons. In December 2014, a few months after the rise of ISIS, Sisi gave a speech at al-Azhar in which he called on the clerics in the audience to lead a “religious revolution,” with the aim of opposing Islamic extremism.

To a large extent the al-Azhar scholars balked at the demand, and very little has changed since then. Toward the international community the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayeb, has tried to present the institution as responsible and tolerant—as shown, for example, by his shared declaration with Pope Francis in 2019. But within Egypt there is no evidence that these initiatives have had much effect: conservative clerics (including Muslim Brotherhood supporters and Salafists) still occupy senior academic positions, textbooks and syllabi have not undergone meaningful reforms, and the institution has exploited the laws on blasphemy to prosecute anyone who calls for a review of the extreme interpretations of the tradition. Al-Azhar has also not shrunk from conflict with Sisi around issues such as the call to put an end to verbal divorce. After a number of failed attempts by the President to extend his control of the institution, in 2020 the Parliament temporarily approved a law that would remove Dar al-Iftaa (the main body responsible for disseminating religious rulings) from al-Azhar’s control and place it under cabinet supervision (Feuer, 2020). Ultimately the law did not pass, and thus a proposal that could have led to a drastic reduction in the power of al-Azhar was rejected, at least for now.

Unlike al-Azhar, the Ministry of Endowments—and in particular, Minister Mohammed Mokhtar Gom’a, who is close to Sisi—called for a review of the Sunna using modern analytical tools, and also called on religious leaders to interpret the classical texts with reference to contemporary social norms, emphasizing the difference between a “sacred principle” and “human thought that is written about the sacred text.” In his efforts to promote these ideas, Gom’a encountered strong opposition from the al-Azhar leadership, and competition between the institutions has constituted an additional barrier to any significant reform of Egyptian establishment Islam (Yehoshua, 2020).

Establishment Islam in Morocco
A similar form of institutional competition can be seen in Morocco, although there the religious legitimacy of the King, together with his role as the state’s chief religious authority, has accounted for the relative success of the kingdom’s efforts to reform the religious discourse using the official institutions of Moroccan Islam. In 2015 the King established a new institution in Rabat, whose declared main purpose is to train imams so that they will be able to counteract extremist strains of the religion. The institution’s students are not only from the kingdom but also from countries in West Africa and even Europe—reflecting the regime’s drive to export its own brand of “moderate Islam.” The courses at the academy are divided into groups: Islamic law, humanities (including courses on history, Western philosophy, Islamic philosophy, and comparative religion), and vocational training. The last group reflects the expectation that most of the students will return to their countries and work as imams in addition to their main professions. As for the courses on religious subjects, the syllabi emphasize the reformist orientation that the country has promoted for over a decade, in particular the state’s preference for the Maliki school of Islamic law, the Ash’ari theological school, and Sufism. The courses on Islamic law focus on sayings and
actions attributed to the Prophet, and include lessons that delegitimize the practice of takfir.

The underlying assumption of the imam training academy is that extremism derives from ignorance and lack of knowledge of the classical texts, rather than from controversies over the interpretation of these texts. Therefore, the students do not return to their countries with particularly sophisticated knowledge, but the goal is more modest: the academy seeks to inoculate these students against extremist teachings so they can, in turn, instruct citizens of their own countries who have little knowledge of the religious tradition. The imams graduating from the academy will likely not be able to persuade someone who has been radicalized on the internet to renounce his jihadist ideology, but the academy’s leaders have a different target audience in mind: those who have not been exposed to significant religious messages, either online or elsewhere. In this sense, in Morocco, establishment Islam is seen as a barrier to extremism, but not necessarily a cure.

Throughout 2016 and 2017, a number of official statements in Riyadh hinted that Saudi Arabia was planning to fundamentally alter the place of religion in the public sphere.

Establishment Islam in Saudi Arabia
Throughout 2016 and 2017, a number of official statements in Riyadh hinted that Saudi Arabia was planning to fundamentally alter the place of religion in the public sphere and revise the way in which it promotes Salafi doctrine all over the world, as part of broader changes in its religious policy. Indeed, since the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the kingdom has taken steps designed to limit the authority of certain religious institutions (for example, by allowing women to drive, opening cinemas, and opening performance venues); integrate more progressive voices into other religious institutions (as shown by the appointment of relatively liberal thinkers to the Council of Senior Scholars—the supreme religious body in the kingdom); and silence independent clerics who were identified with the political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood.

As for the export of Saudi Islam worldwide, which for decades was accused of spreading Islamic extremism and encouraging terror organizations, the rise of MBS led to significant (and largely positive) rhetorical changes in the activities of the Muslim World League, the main body responsible for the export of Saudi Salafism. These changes were reflected in four principal shifts: greater preference for the national identity of Muslims over their religious identity; a stronger condemnation of Islamist ideologies that encourage terror; an expansion of inter-faith activity (including openness to Christian worship in the kingdom); and a series of condemnations of the Holocaust. At the same time, concrete changes on the ground in countries where the League has operated have been limited, partly due to the nature of the ties between the headquarters of the League in Mecca and its branches all over the world, and partly due to relations between the organization and other religious institutions within Saudi Arabia. These limitations reflect internal limitations in the kingdom, where social reforms have not yet extended to deeper changes in the education system (Feuer, 2019).

The Question of Legitimacy
The foregoing survey prompts the question whether changes in the rhetoric of establishment Islam have influenced Sunni populations in the region, and whether the public in general perceives establishment Islam as legitimate. The answer is complex: on the one hand, over the years a conceptual dichotomy has developed between establishment Islam and what is deemed “authentic” Islam. There are a number of reasons for the distinction, including the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and other non-state Islamist movements that have challenged the religious control of regimes, the lack of independence for religious leaders linked to
government institutions, and the growing public mistrust of rulers in the Arab world in general. In many cases there is mutual dependence between the regimes and the official religious institutions. The picture of the Imam of al-Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb standing next to Sisi (together with the Coptic Pope) at Sisi’s announcement on his replacement of Morsi was a good illustration of the complex relations between the rulers and establishment Islam. This picture shows both the regime’s need to garner legitimacy from establishment Islam and the desire of Islamic institutions to receive regime support. In some cases, the efforts to promote a “moderate” religious discourse have been interpreted as a submission to Western pressure, and to a certain extent, Arab countries indeed use terms such as “tolerant Islam” to draw closer to Western countries. In other cases, there is no doubt that rulers are implementing religious reforms in order to weaken competing centers of strength and authority. These considerations appear to undermine the credibility of establishment Islam.

On the other hand, it is too early to eulogize establishment Islam in the Sunni world, and we should be wary of claims that the relevant institutions have lost all legitimacy. In 2017, a YouGov poll in Jordan found that Jordanians trusted the mufti, who is appointed by the King, more than any other Islamic personality (that is, non-state figures) (Williamson, 2019, p. 7). A 2019 study in Saudi Arabia indicated higher levels of trust for religious leaders the closer they were to state institutions (Freer, 2019, p. 1). As for young people in the region, who according to some polls have recently displayed tendencies of growing opposition to religion, a Zogby survey in 2015 nevertheless found that most young people in Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE agreed that the state should regulate Friday sermons in the mosques, religious programs on television, and public religious lectures. This survey also found that 89 percent of Moroccans and 90 percent of Egyptians want the state to ensure that religious discourse does not promote incitement, hatred, and violence (Tabah Foundation, 2016, p. 16). Such findings suggest that establishment Islam still has meaning and a potentially important role to play for populations in Sunni countries. Whether governments can exploit this potential in an effective way remains an open question.

It is too early to eulogize establishment Islam in the Sunni world, and we should be wary of claims that the relevant institutions have lost all legitimacy.

3. Salafi-Jihadism: After the Dream of the Caliphate
The debate surrounding the Salafi-jihadism theoretical maelstrom requires a few preliminary clarifications. ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their respective proxies and allies continue to operate as multi-branched, networked terror organizations. They take on and then abandon names, brands, and leaders, fight for their survival against international and regional coalitions, and make structural and tactical adjustments according to the security and political situation in their various arenas of operation. The fact that in recent years they have joined campaigns that were already very bloody or have engaged in failed Third World countries, and have drastically limited the quantity and quality of their attacks on Western countries, can fuel a mistaken sense, particularly in Western public opinion, that Salafi-jihadism is on the wane as an international threat, but this is not the case.

On a deeper social level, the Salafi-jihadi idea has existed in one form or another since the birth of Islam. Although the percentage of Muslims who take an active part in the implementation of the Salafi-jihadi idea in its modern form is very small, even negligible, the ideology has created a duality, a kind of ambivalence of attraction-rejection in broader Muslim society. On the one hand, Salafi-jihadism paints the whole of Islam (in the eyes of many in the Muslim
The gamble of implementing jihad “to the end” was revealed as a mistake, not only because it mobilized the international community against the Islamic State, but also because of the cognitive fear it left in the Middle East.

On the other hand, this ideology exploits an internal conflict present among some Muslims to the extent that it offers them a solution to a troubling recognition that the Islamic world has for centuries lagged behind the West. The jihadi solution—active promotion of changing this reality and bringing Islam back to “the right side of history”—enjoys significant attraction and draws passive support even from broad sections of the public that do not participate actively in combat and terror. At least “in spirit” they are partaking of the obligation for jihad, and from the standpoint of the organizations they constitute a reservoir for potential future generations of activists.

The long evolution of the Salafi-jihadi ideology occurred in the shadow of failures, persecution, and a general feeling of pessimism. These experiences are a material part of the identity of the followers of fundamentalist Islam and so far have not discouraged them, but rather spurred them to ideological development and new forms of the fight against “heresy.” The jihadi discourse abounds with apologetic texts explaining “why victory is delayed.” The faithful find explanations for themselves, and examine their actions to see where they must improve in order to overcome this “delay.” In that respect, the non-realization of the vision creates periods of confusion and heated internal debate, leading to ideological renewal and a fresh evolutionary stage in the practical expression of the struggle.

Why, therefore, is Salafi-jihadism experiencing deep ideological confusion? The current decline—revolving around the collapse of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq—occurred after years of success, when it seemed that the momentum would continue, against a backdrop of regional and international circumstances that were ideal for zealous Muslim circles to create the “perfect storm.” That is why the fall to the ground of reality was so intense. Islamist zealots are finding it far more difficult to explain that once again this is just a temporary setback on the way to redemption.

The theoretical and practical solution that Salafi-jihadism offers is etched into the broader Muslim consciousness as another failed model, like other ideas that have circulated in the Middle East over the past decade. Moreover, the “victory” of the ISIS model over more moderate versions of Salafi-jihadism solidified the unequivocal identification of this ideological school with total and exceptional brutality, even compared to figures such as Bashar al-Assad and Saddam Hussein. Therefore, the gamble of implementing jihad “to the end” was revealed as a mistake, not only because it mobilized the international community against the Islamic State, but also because of the cognitive fear it left in the Middle East. A tactical withdrawal back to a “softer jihad”—in sermons, education, personal example, withdrawal from permissive society, and so on—at present appears to be impossible and without purpose, something that nobody is buying, at least until the fresh memories begin to fade.

The jihadi discourse is built on long internal negotiations and fierce debate between opposing schools of thought inside and outside Islam. They inspired jihadi ideas even at the price of splitting into sub-factions around marginal nuances, and forced the movement to continually re-examine concepts and define its positions on a range of questions, for example about priorities in the struggle (Sunni heretics, Shiite heretics, the capitalist West, the communist East, Israel, and the
Jews) and the legitimacy of violence. Jihadi thinkers returned to ancient Islamic sources and commentaries from the Middle Ages to establish arguments and present references. On the other hand, the current reality reflects an ideological void, for there have been no innovations and no renewals; the internal rifts look like a competition between stocks whose shares are falling but no longer sport essential ideological differences between them; and there is no longer any real ideological competition with other streams of thought, whether secular or Islamic, because they have all failed or died away.

Similarly, the “generational chain” of thinkers and leaders, men of the book and men of the sword, who have inspired and enriched the Salafi-jihadi discourse—in part by the many years of friction between them—is now in decline. These arguments between “teachers” and “pupils” or “pupil-friends,” reflecting the natural tension between the formulaters of strategy and the commanders and operators who dealt with the tactical situation on the ground, gave rise inter alia to the jihadi underground movements in Egypt from the 1960s to the 1990s; al-Qaeda in Afghanistan—“the mother of jihad arenas”; and ISIS in its various incarnations, from Zarqawi to Baghdadi. The dialectics among all of these groups created extensive, living, and dynamic jihadi literature, which connected and divided figures from different periods, geographical sectors, and languages—each with its own innovations, emphases, and instructions, based on time and space. Today, although some of these (persecuted) figures are still working and writing, it is hard to point to new ideas or fresh concepts.

The messianic dimension of the Salafi-jihadi idea—dealing with the day after the establishment of the caliphate—has been forced to deal with a reality that does not match its promises. The ISIS caliphate was presented as “the start of redemption” on the way to the “great war,” Armageddon, which would finally decide the struggle between faith and heresy some time before the Day of Judgment. This theological idea was a strong motivation for the migration of young believers from the West and all over the Arab world to the combat arenas in Iraq and Syria. Moreover, the apocalyptic narrative of ISIS gave details, including defined timetables, for the stages after the establishment of the caliphate, but the meeting between ISIS theology and messianic expectations widespread in Muslim society did not occur.

Where does the ideological confusion of Salafi-jihadism lead? In historical terms, Islamic awakening occurred in waves. Drastic changes in the lives of Muslims led to intellectual developments as a response, and in some cases to a practical translation of the ideas by a new generation of fanatics. From the start of the 20th century to the present, there have been four such waves:

The first wave occurred in the first half of the 20th century, when for the first time since the appearance of Islam there was no longer a caliphate, and it was replaced by nationalism, foreign occupation, or colonialism, alongside fundamental changes in social, cultural, and economic life—the outcome of the encounter with the West and modernization. The ideological competition in the international system (capitalism-communism, liberalism-fascism, religion-secularism) carried strong implications for Middle East society. Within this ideological struggle, the innovative and revolutionary faction identified with the faithful described this new reality as a “disease” that was affecting Islam, and suggested a “remedy” comprising a purification of the faith and revival of the model of the Islamic patriarchs (salafi); a new interpretation of the tradition (ijtihad); cultivation of the public by education, preaching, and aid (dawah); and political activism. The main threat was perceived as external (Western colonialism), and the response was moderate.

The second wave emerged in the era of military regimes, which effectively eliminated...
the space for civil society (in which the Muslim faithful operated) and promoted a modernist, nationalist-Arab, and socialist ideology as a kind of alternative religion, leaving very limited room for Islam. In this new reality, the faithful became a persecuted enemy, and were forced to redefine the problem (apparently homegrown Muslims rather than foreign conquerors) and the solution (jihad against the “infidel” regimes). The result was a new system of concepts: instead of a “sick” Islam that could be cured came the “new jahiliyyah” requiring thorough historical change; instead of moderate and gradual dawah was takfir (the rejection of infidels by the believers, no longer only by Allah); instead of fitna, the fundamentally unacceptable anarchy and civil war, was jihad against the destruction decreed by the rulers on the faithful.

The third wave was evident from the 1980s to the start of the new millennium: a gradual return to the struggle against the external enemy, but this time not only in the West but also in the East (Soviet Union), and not only in the Middle East and the Muslim world (dar el-Islam) but also in enemy territory (dar el-Harb). This is the reality that saw the birth in Afghanistan of the idea of global jihad as a model for liberating other conquered Muslim lands (Kashmir, Chechnya, Bosnia, Iraq, Palestine), and then as a concept that sought to undermine the West’s sense of security and economic stability, a bastion for the infidel regimes in the Middle East. This wave peaked with the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, “smashing the idols” or bringing about the “collapse of the Tower of Babel” in Salafi-jihadi terminology.

The fourth wave can be dated from the announcement of the ISIS caliphate until its fall. Whereas the collapse of “infidel” regimes did not happen because of Salafi-jihadism, “the work of the righteous is done by others,” and the new chaotic reality created an opportunity to bring the struggle back to the heart of the Middle East, against regimes that were still grasping for survival, against the Shiites who were trying to exploit the situation to gain strength, and against the external forces (American and Russian) who were stirring the pot. The problem is that the establishment of the caliphate was also the peak of this wave, which largely ended with its collapse.

Is a fifth wave of Salafi-jihadi revival in a new format taking shape below the surface? This is an open question. The coronavirus crisis has created the potential for significant changes in the reality of life worldwide and in the Middle East, and may signal new directions for Salafi-jihadism. At this stage it appears that the followers of this concept, like all players in the global and regional system, are still defining the problem. Identifying the solution will take longer—for Salafi-jihadism itself and for those studying it.

**4. Shiite Islam: From Revolutionary Unrest to Ideological Decline**

Shiism is fundamentally based on a story of tyrannical exploitation and injustice, to be rectified at the end of days, and on the practice of *taqiya*—hiding one’s real religious identity during hard times and waiting for the storm to pass. In this way the Shia are presumed to be more ideologically equipped to deal with crises and dramatic changes in life, compared to the hegemonic Sunni community. To this strength should be added the economic independence of senior Shiite clerics and their status as role models, whom the faithful are required to venerate as the source of answers to all their life questions, not least questions that arise due to the changing times.

But in recent decades there have been a number of processes within the Shia world and in the dynamics between the Shia and the Sunna that have now brought the Shia, in
ideological terms, to one of their lowest points in the modern era. The clerical seizure of power \textit{(wilayat al-faqih)} by Khomeini transformed a minority approach into the dominant conceptual element in terms of religion and state relations in the Shiite discourse. The result was the institutionalization, stagnation, and decay of religious thought in the madrassahs of Qom and Mashhad. Senior clerics who held different views from those of Khomeini and his heirs and still supported, in one way or another, the separation of religion and state disappeared or were silenced. Their place was gradually taken by minor clerics who were clearly identified with the establishment. The gap between the terminology of revolution and the institutionalized reality and stagnation grew ever wider.

At the tip of the pyramid of the Iranian religious-political establishment—the Supreme Leader’s throne—the balance between the chief’s two hats was upset, i.e., the hats worn by the person who is supposed to be a role model at the religious-spiritual level and above politics in practical-concrete terms. Khomeini tailored the position of leader to his wishes. His heir Khamenei is his inferior in every way—personal prestige, religious scholarship, authority of rulings, and political strength. He has amassed great political experience, but is perceived to be mired in dirty politics and internal struggles within the religious establishment, instead of maintaining the status of statesman. It seems likely that Khamenei’s eventual heir will be a religious politician rather than a \textit{marja taqlid}.

The political link between the Shia and Iran has also grown tighter. Direct contact between the Iranian regime and Shiite Muslims in the Arab world (and the Muslim world in general), which was formerly limited due to differences of language and technology, has increased the tensions between Sunnis and Shia and blurred the attempts (on both sides) to highlight shared aspects. The deep ideological differences between the two factions in areas of messianism, political thought, and historical myth have been sharpened, at the expense of the relatively minor differences in aspects of religious rulings, law, and daily practice.

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The Shiite discourse outside Iran—both ideological and political—has become a reaction to the dictates of the Iranian religious establishment. The ranks of senior Arab-Shiite clerical role models are shrinking. Those who remain are generally classified, both within the Shiite communities and in the eyes of the Sunni regimes, by their attitudes to the Iranian regime and their concept of \textit{wilayat al-faqih}—for or against. The opposing voices—of which the most prominent thus far has been that of Grand Ayatollah (the highest rank in the Shiite religious hierarchy) Ali Sistani from Najaf in Iraq, who is close to 90—do enjoy personal prestige and broad influence in the Shiite world outside Iran, but they find it difficult to dictate a competing, relevant, and tangible ideological-political agenda. The political and social chaos in Iraq, which has been controlled for about fifteen years by the Shiite majority, is a good illustration of this difficulty.

\textbf{The Shiite Faction and the Arab Upheaval}

The foregoing description of processes shows how the Shiite approach to the upheavals in the Middle East resulting from the Arab Spring is fully embodied in what is offered by the Iranian regime, which is theoretically revolutionary but actually institutionalized and decaying. Its theoretical concept for the region can be summed up by the old, familiar vision of exporting the revolution, which was revived in the chaos created by the upheaval. The
Iranian regime perceived the Arab Spring as a rare opportunity to upset the historic balance of power between the Sunnis and the Shia, to weaken the pro-Western Sunni regimes, to tighten its patronage of the Shiite communities in the area, and to reinforce the members of the so-called Shiite axis.

The political and military trends in the Middle East before the Arab Spring and in the first years thereafter did indeed play into the hands of the Iranian effort. At first the Islamic regime managed to separate itself from the immediate danger facing other regimes in the region, and to survive the public upheaval on its home territory (the riots in the summer of 2009), while many of its Sunni rivals crumbled in the face of a similar challenge in the two following years. In the established religious discourse in Iran, this distinction was identified with the correctness of the revolutionary path, compared to the decay of the heretical Sunni regimes, even though the regime actually survived thanks to the massive use of force.

During the years of upheaval—which saw the nuclear treaty with the international community, the threat to the Assad regime, the collapse of the Islamic State, the political dominance of Iran’s supporters in Lebanon and Iraq, the Saudi entanglement in Yemen, intra-Suni struggles between Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates on the one hand, and Turkey and Qatar on the other, and the (complex) Iranian cooperation with Russia—developments gave the Iranian regime a sense that the pendulum was swinging in the Shiite direction, and that the dream of exporting the revolution would be realized. Once again political practice dictated the ideological line: the sacrifices Iran was required to make for the nuclear treaty were presented by Khamenei as “heroic flexibility, the approach that is necessary in certain situations, as long as we stick to our principles.” This discourse evoked the notion of “drinking the poisoned chalice,” which was how Khomeini described his coerced consent in 1988 to end the war with Iraq.

The defeat of ISIS and the collapse of the caliphate—another event requiring “heroic flexibility” from Iran in its indirect cooperation with the “Great Satan,” the United States—was ideologically also perceived as a victory in the local derby between two religious concepts that developed in parallel during the 20th century and were striving for the same objective. While Khomeini’s disciples have held onto power for over four decades, the state of the disciples of Sayyid Qutb broke up within three years.

However, the initial soaring of Iranian stock was followed by several years of a sharp plunge that affected all the interests of the Shiite axis. The withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear treaty, the biting sanctions, the US “maximum pressure” campaign against the Iranian regime and its allies, the ongoing military friction with Israel in the “campaign between wars,” the semi-covert competition with Russia and with the Assad regime over the limits of Iranian influence in Syria, and above all, the public awakening (for many reasons) among the Shiites against the regimes in Iran itself, in Iraq, and in Lebanon all offset the achievements, and brought the Shia back to their natural place as a weak minority.

Public unrest in Iraq was also a reminder that Shiite Islam is not homogenous, and again highlighted the voices objecting to the Gordian knot tied by Khomeini between the religious establishment and the political system, and to the Iranian effort to claim ownership of Arab land in the name of “Shiite brotherhood,” which is not accepted by many of the madrassahs of Najaf and Karbala, or by the Shiite political system in Iraq. The killing of Qasem Soleimani not only disrupted the strategic and tactical plans of the Shiite axis, but also symbolized severe damage to the export of the revolution as a vision and an idea. The soft Iranian response to his killing illustrates the confusion and limits of Iran’s power and that of its partners at the present time.

The coronavirus pandemic has added its own dramatic dimension to the instability in
Iran and the Shiite system in general, with the long-term effects still difficult to assess. In the short term, Iran’s identification as the focus of the largest outbreak of the virus in the Middle East has already aroused tensions beyond its borders, for example, between Hezbollah and its opponents in Lebanon regarding the demand to stop flights between Iran and Lebanon. At least in this respect, export of the revolution morphed into export of the virus.

**The Ramifications of the Ideological Crisis**

This multi-dimensional crisis has highlighted the ideological and conceptual stagnation of the Iranian religious-political system. It continues to offer the public “a resistance economy,” “a strong stand,” and other hollow slogans that have not changed since the 1979 revolution. Meanwhile the pandemic has exposed something of the confusion in the current Shiite discourse, the political cynicism it involves, and, occasionally, something of the dangers inherent in the solutions that it proposes to current problems. For example, under cover of the ongoing dispute between the Iranian religious establishment and its medical system, which has both religious dimensions (Islamic limits on the ability of man and modernity to intervene in the actions of God) and political aspects, various clerics have promoted a range of would-be folk cures for COVID-19—all kinds of oils and creams under the brand name of alternative “Islamic medicine.” This unorthodox phenomenon has been criticized by the public, but it emerged that obedience to the laws of Islam could also have saved lives: Iranian media reported that hundreds of people died and thousands were hospitalized with methanol poisoning (industrial alcohol) following fake news claiming that it provides protection against the virus.

Indeed, even the Israeli angle is not absent from the Shiite discourse around COVID-19: Ayatollah Makharm Shirazi, a senior and well-known cleric, denied reports in the Iranian media that he had permitted the use of an Israeli vaccine, if and when one is developed, assuming there are no alternatives. While this is a case of fake news (or a fake denial) within an entirely theoretical debate, it does illustrate how at a time of confusion, Shiite discourse takes refuge in familiar topics, i.e., loathing of all aspects of Israel. The basic rule of navigation applies here: “Are you lost? Go back to the last place where you knew your location.”

In other words, Shiite ideological discourse is bogged down in deep, multifaceted confusion. Looking forward and assuming that public protests in Shiite theaters—in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon—continue and gather new intensity in a post-COVID world, the religious discourse could turn to new directions that could rouse it from stagnation and connect with the civilian discourse. Is it possible to build a link between economic-social-civil protest, which also has anti-religious features, and a new religious ideological awakening, or will the clash between the establishments and “those on the ground” become harder to overcome?

**Conclusion: The New Crisis as an Opportunity—Is Islam also the Solution in the post-COVID World?**

The strategic discourse in Israel and Western countries tends to see the coronavirus pandemic, and particularly the day after, as another wave of crisis, perhaps worse than previous ones, in the chain of upheavals in the Middle East since the end of 2010. Having learned from the experience that events were initially and optimistically hailed as the Arab Spring, students of the Middle East see in the current crisis potential for exacerbating the fundamental problems of the region: the collapse of other economies and regimes, loss of governance, lack of basic resources, renewed vigor for wars and violent conflicts, and more severe public unrest. All this presents alongside the persistent question over what now remains of the world order and the future of globalization.
This pessimistic discourse invites the question of whether the COVID-19 crisis makes the formation of a new regional order—which we have arguably been witnessing since 2010—even more elusive, or could actually accelerate it. Even if we are still far from this new order, there is now at least a potential to re-awaken the theoretical political-social-economic debate in the Middle East, after a long period of void. One of the most prominent ideas that could compete for the heart of the agenda is the concept that “Islam is the solution,” as interpreted by the various factions described in this article. It is certainly not the only idea in the emerging conceptual market, but it bears considering whether the COVID crisis—which could disrupt all plans for a new global and regional (dis)order—could actually inject new blood into the ideas and concepts of the “Islam is the solution” family. Is the new crisis, which in traditional communities would presumably reinforce the link between the believer and his creator, an opportunity to resolve the old and ongoing crisis of believers in Islam? Put differently, for the confused factions reviewed here, could it be that “COVID is the solution?”

As part of the conceptual discussion, several potential scenarios bear mention:

Recovery of the centralized-authoritarian order, and rehabilitation of the traditional Middle East Muslim concept that “a dictator is better than anarchy”: In this scenario the religious establishments would play a central role in shaping the foundations of legitimacy for existing nationalist-secular regimes, and movements of political Islam would continue to vacillate between integration in the existing order and separation (willing or imposed) from it.

Collapse of the remnants of the old order (collapse of additional regimes, renewal of public unrest): In this scenario, groups identified with the old order—the Sunni religious establishment in the Arab world and the Shiite religious establishment in Iran—would be swept away and lose public influence. On the other hand, actors clearly identified as the opposition (Salafi-jihadism) or as the provisional opposition (Muslim Brotherhood) would remain to shape a new political order, and each group would bring the lessons it has learned from its failures in previous rounds of the regional upheaval, perhaps in a new guise. In this scenario, it is also possible for new religious groups to emerge with their own version of “Islam is the solution.”

In the scenario where the current crisis continues from the point at which the previous crisis was stopped—in other words, broad public unrest particularly in the Shiite space (Iran, Iraq, Lebanon) and stagnation in the Sunni space (the status quo in places like Syria, Libya, and Yemen)—an ideological-religious-political struggle could develop that would encourage the Sunni factions (as a whole) at the expense of today’s main Shiite faction. This would unfold in a way that adds another dimension to the struggles between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and perhaps deepen the rifts between the radical axis and the pragmatic Sunni states.

Any discussion of the ideological, religious, and political trajectories of the Islamic factions following the COVID-19 crisis naturally involves a long-term outlook. But at this stage it is possible to highlight several key questions that will likely affect those trajectories: will they manage to connect the economic-social-civic protests, which until now have also had anti-religious features, to a religious ideological reawakening, or is the path between the establishments and those on the ground harder to negotiate? What will be the next wave of the cyclical revival of Islamism look like, and when will it occur? How far will it be possible to link it to the coronavirus as the direct trigger? How far will ideological discourse in the Middle East be affected by Western ideas that could gain momentum after the pandemic? Is it possible, for example, to imagine a new form of “Arab socialism” that will challenge the conservative religious space as it challenged it sixty years ago? And finally, will other secular-civic models fertilize the
religious ideological discourse and force it to make adjustments and changes?

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References


The deepening rift in the Middle East between the Sunni majority and the Shii minority has harmed Iran’s efforts to consolidate its status as the leader of the Islamic world. To mitigate the rift, Iran has worked on several ideological levels: the first is the effort to prove that the rift has no deep ideological or historical roots, and that all Muslims, Sunnis and Shiis, must unite against the real enemies of Islam—the United States and Israel. As part of this endeavor, Iran has sought to abolish various Shii practices that arouse Sunni anger, particularly the curses against the first three caliphs, who are admired by all Sunnis. The second effort was to create a united front of the Shia and the moderate mainstream Sunni Islam against both the Saudi Wahhabis and the Salafi-jihadi camp, by presenting these two groups as deviants that have completely distorted the essence of “correct” Islam, and in fact operate in the service of the United States and Israel. This article analyzes Iran’s ideological activity and the difficulties it faces.

Keywords: Iran, Shia, Islam, Sunni, Wahhabi, Salafi-jihadi, Israel, United States
Introduction
The upheaval that engulfed the Arab world starting in late December 2010 and erroneously labeled the Arab Spring put an end to a decade of political and strategic achievements for Iran and Shii organizations in the Middle East, and presented some of the Shii communities in the region with challenges that for a while were perceived as existential threats. The wave of protest, deriving from the social, economic, and cultural crisis that plagued and still plagues some Arab states, was originally directed against failing Arab regimes. However, a number of concurrent processes lent the upheaval the nature of a violent sectarian clash between the Sunni majority and the Shii minority. The cruel suppression of the civil protest in Syria changed the nature of the uprising to a violent struggle led by Salafi-jihadi Sunni organizations, who placed the Shiis at the head of their list of enemies to be destroyed. The policy of exclusion of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki toward the Sunni minority pushed them into the arms of the local branch of al-Qaeda, which later assumed the name the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and which adopted an extreme anti-Shii line. Hostilities in Syria threatened to spill over into Lebanon and undermine the fragile political balance there, which benefited Hezbollah, arousing fear of an outbreak of violence between it and Sunni organizations, mainly in Tripoli. The protests in Bahrain were presented by the rulers of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia as part of the Shii struggle against the Sunnis and not as the protest of an oppressed majority against an oppressive minority regime—a depiction that helped to maintain United States support for the Sunni government. Added to these were the growing hostilities in Yemen between the Houthis (who are part of the Zaydi Shii stream) and the government, as well as the terror activities by Sunni extremists against the Shii minority in Pakistan, which have taken the lives of thousands since the start of the current century.

According to the Iranian regime, the list of Islam’s enemies is headed by the United States and Israel, who are to blame for the intra-Islamic strife.

Among the most prominent schisms was the strategic enmity between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is beyond the scope of this article, but one of its basic elements is the doctrinal hostility between Saudi Wahhabi Islam and Shii Islam. Consequently, framing the various conflicts as a Sunni-Shii struggle severely damaged Iran’s efforts to establish itself as the leader of the Islamic world with the consent of the Sunni majority. It was clear to Iran and its Shii allies that the demographic reality of a Sunni majority and Shii minority in the region cannot be changed, and thus a military solution to sectarian hostilities was not realistic. The Shiis, with Iran at their helm, therefore adopted two complementary courses of action, intended to weaken or blur the sectarian nature of the conflicts and build bridges to the Sunni mainstream. The first move raised the banner of Islamic unity—Sunni and Shiis—against the external and internal enemies of Islam. According to the Iranian regime, this list is headed by the United States and Israel, who are to blame for the intra-Islamic strife. The second course of action was to present the Wahhabis and the Salafi-jihadi organizations as responsible for the bloodshed within Islam, and as the common enemy of correct Islam, practiced by moderate Sunnis and Shiis alike, acting in the service of the external enemies. The Salafi-jihadi groups were presented as deviants that distorted Islam, and were declared heretics against whom jihad must be waged. These two moves preceded the outbreak of the Arab Spring, but were accelerated by the regional upheaval and its aftermath.

Bringing Sunnis and Shiis together
Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei led both moves. In numerous speeches he argued that the divisions in the
Muslim world are not natural, and were, rather, imposed and fostered by imperialism led by the United States and Israel. These enemies knew that if the Islamic umma were united, “it would have conquered the world” (Office of the Supreme Leader, 2015a). Therefore they founded al-Qaeda and ISIS and fomented civil wars in Islamic countries, in order to deflect the Islamic umma’s attention from the real threat it faces, that is, Zionism. Khamenei criticized the Western media for describing the violence in Iraq as a conflict between Sunna and Shia, whereas it actually was a struggle between “humanity and barbarity” (Khamenei: No Sword between Sunna and Shia,” 2014).

Iran presented itself as driven by faith in Islamic solidarity and revolutionary commitment “to support the oppressed” wherever they may be, and counter the efforts of the United States, which in Iranian eyes sows discord between Muslims. Thus Khamenei took pride in the fact that in its support for the oppressed, Iran does “not look at [their] religious denomination and we have offered the same support that we provided to our Shiī brethren in Lebanon to our Sunni brethren in Gaza” (Office of the Supreme Leader, 2015b).

As part of this policy, each year since the Arab upheaval, Iran has hosted Islamic conferences to bring together the various streams in Islam. The conferences are attended by hundreds of clerics, mostly Sunni, from forty different countries. The three principal messages that have emerged from these conferences and from the hundreds of official publications in Iran insist that the gaps in beliefs and religious conduct between the Salafi-jihadi movement and the Sunni mainstream are far wider than the gaps between the main Sunni and Shiī streams; the Salafi-jihadi movement is a threat to all Muslims, and not only the Shiīs; and the United States and Israel are behind this movement, and they are the beneficiaries of its murderous activities.

The Iranian spokesmen have thus tried to present the theological differences between the Sunnis and the Shiīs as historical issues that are now less important, particularly in light of the broad common ground between the two groups on a wide range of issues. This effort demands a re-evaluation of a number of basic Shiī principles, as well as action to abolish some popular religious practices that have aroused the anger of Sunnis for hundreds of years. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani declared at the Islamic Unity Conference in 2016 that Sunnis and Shiīs lived side by side and respected each other for many centuries. The Shiī did not harm core elements sacred to the Sunnis, and all Muslims respected the companions of the Prophet (aṣ-ṣaḥābah) and the Prophet’s family. Like Khamenei, he rejected the sectarian nature of the conflict and defined it as a struggle between “American Islam” (that is, Saudi and Salafi Islam) and “pure Muhammadan Islam” (Rouhani, 2016).

Former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani went further in seeking to minimize the heavy legacy of early Islamic history on modern political reality. At the Sunni-Shiī unity conference in January 2014 he asked, with a certain degree of despair, “Until when will we continue killing each other over the question of who should have been the first caliph?” (the successor of the Prophet Muhammad), and added that “the questions of how they wash their hands and feet before prayer and how they pray cannot be a logical cause of conflict.” Rafsanjani recognized the historical quarrel between the Sunnis and Shiīs and their respective development with different religious texts, traditions, and doctrines. However, he was ready to challenge the symbolic and emotional weight of these differences and to focus instead on the present and future, by emphasizing that quarrels over the past should not be allowed to become a source of violent rifts in the present (Savion et al., 2014).

Considering the historic centrality of these disputes to the Sunni-Shiī division, it appears that Rafsanjani sought to change the nature of the relationship between the two sects—from a sectarian dispute based on animosity and
mutual exclusion, to a situation resembling the various denominations in contemporary Western Christianity, a situation of peaceful co-existence between groups that share major tenets of belief and tolerate their differences. However, his words aroused strong criticism from conservative clerics, who argued that yielding on the question of the Prophet’s successor would undermine the basic principle of the Shi’i world view and the doctrine of the Guardianship of the Jurist, which is the foundation of legitimacy for the current Iranian regime (“Critique of Mr. Rafsanjani’s Answer to One Claim,” 2014; “Isn’t It Better for Us Shiis not to Judge,” n.d.).

Efforts to Appease the Sunnis
As part of the aim of easing sectarian hostility, Khamenei renewed the effort that he had begun years earlier— to ban and revoke the practice of disassociation and cursing of the first three caliphs, whom Shiis see as the usurpers who had deprived Ali, the Prophet Muhammad’s son-in-law and cousin, of his rightful succession. Various spokesmen for the regime argue that the real “renunciation” should be directed against the West or the Salafi-jihadi organizations, who are the true enemy, and not the simple Sunni believers (“Ninth of Rabi Awwal is the Day,” 2015.)

On January 21, 2013, during Islamic Unity Week, the official Iranian news agency IRNA published a collection of religious rulings from leading Iranian clerics who strongly criticized the “curses and expressions of scorn for the sacred values of other religions and ethnic groups,” increasing tensions and divisions between Muslims (“View of the Sources of Emulation regarding Deviationist Activities,” 2013). That these rulings were reissued in 2015 and 2016 apparently indicates that they did not achieve a broad popular response. Some of the rulings stressed that it is forbidden to curse the Sunni caliphs in public, implying that it is permitted to curse them in the heart. In other words, the reservation reflected the political nature of these religious rulings, rather than a significant ideological change.

Another popular custom that the Iranian authorities wished to abolish was the celebration on the 9th of the month of Rabī’ al-Awwal, marking the date of the assassination in 634 of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who is particularly detested by the Shiis. The assassin was the Persian slave Piruz Abu-Lulu Nahavandi, who according to Iranian tradition fled to the town of Kashan where he became a popular hero, and his purported grave has become a pilgrimage site. After the 1979 revolution the Iranian government banned the celebrations, but the ban was not enforced. In 2007, responding to pressure by Sunni clerics, the Iranian authorities promised to close the site but did not keep their promise. However, in view of the growing Sunni-Shii hostility since 2012, the authorities decided to increase their publicity campaign against the festivities and the pilgrimages to the grave.

A plethora of statements and publications from clerics of all levels, reflecting the deeply ingrained sense of Shii vulnerability and victimhood vis-à-vis the Sunnis, criticized the celebrations for the harm they have caused to Shiis in the whole region. They contend that the celebrations provoked unnecessary sedition (fitna) between Sunnis and Shiis, leading to the killings of thousands of Shiis in Indonesia, Pakistan, Iraq, and Lebanon by Salafi organizations (“View of the Sources of Emulation regarding the Deviation,” 2013). Hujjat al-Islam Ali Yunesi, former Minister of Intelligence and now an advisor to President Rouhani on minorities, even declared that any person who takes part in such ceremonies against the Sunnis should know that they are accomplices to the bloodshed of Shiis in Pakistan and Iraq and are thus assisting the Salafi criminals (“ʿAlī Yūnesī,” 2013). Rafsanjani, who was more brazen in his willingness to undermine religious conventions, lamented that activities such as the celebrations of Umar’s murder and the cursing of the Sunni caliphs contributed to the
emergence of organizations such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban ("Rafsanjānī," 2014).

While the celebrations reflected animosity toward Sunni Islam, various clerics tried to change their meaning, arguing that the 9th of the month should actually highlight the unity of all Islamic factions against their common enemies, Zionism and the West ("Ninth of Rabi` Awwal: the Holiday," 2013; "Ayatollah’s Bahjat’s View," 2014). In September 2013, as the date for the celebrations approached, the Ministry of Intelligence ordered the police in several towns to forcibly prevent any celebrations. The directive was part of a broader campaign by the Iranian internal security forces against religious groups and media bodies that were accused of fomenting hatred of the Sunnis, against the background of ISIS gains at that time (“Iran’s Intelligence Ministry Bans anti-Sunni Celebrations," 2014). As in other cases, the rulings and bans did not put an end to the custom—illustrating not only the gap between popular Islam and official Islam, but also the depth of anti-Sunni feelings rooted in broad sections of the Shii public.

The repeated rhetoric on the need for Islamic unity and the efforts to abolish anti-Sunni practices did not did not mean, however, that the Iranian clerical establishment intended to revise the doctrines that distinguish it from the Sunna, or their basic attitude toward the early Muslims who, in the Shii view, betrayed Ali. Khamenei’s office sought to allay Shii fears and, possibly, also to discourage Sunni hopes by making it clear that the ideal of Islamic unity did not mean that Shiis or Sunnis had to endorse the beliefs of the other. The various Shii spokesmen stressed that every group should maintain its identity, and that any Sunni wishing to join the Shia should do so only after study and talking with scholars. Moreover, both parties should avoid the whispers (a hint at Satan’s whispers that are mentioned in the Qur’an) of the enemies of Islam who are working to stir up enmity between Muslims, and cooperate against their common enemies (“Unity in the View of the Great Leader of the Revolution," 2014; “View of Clerics and Great Sources," 2015). In other words, an important feature of the attempt to reconcile the Sunni mainstream incorporated an effort to unite against the shared external enemy—the West and Zionism.

The Propaganda War against Wahhabism and Salafi-Jihadism

On a purely religious level, the Shia and Wahhabism, the official religious doctrine in Saudi Arabia, are at opposite ends of the Islamic ideological spectrum. The Wahhabis regard the Shiis as apostates deserving death, because in their view various Shii practices detract from the unity of God and are tantamount to polytheism. Therefore, the Wahhabis resorted to extreme violence against them in the early 19th century. The 1979 Iranian Revolution provided a boost to the Shii communities in the Middle East, and positioned Iran and Saudi Arabia as the main rivals for leadership of the Islamic world. At the same time, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan jolted the Salafi-jihadi organizations into action. They adopted the anti-Shii approach of the important Hanbali jurist Taqi ad-Din Ibn Taymiyya (died 1328), who described the Shiis as apostates deserving of death. For the Shiiis, the fanatic Wahhabi worldview is the source and foundation of the murderous ideology of the Salafi-jihadi movements, and they therefore link these two phenomena.

Since the fall of the Baath regime in Iraq, the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda has waged a cruel war of terror on the Shiis, costing the lives of thousands of civilians. The (short-lived) achievements of ISIS, which peaked with the capture of Mosul in 2014 and the announcement of the Islamic caliphate, increased Shii fears.
The ISIS threat to settle historical accounts with the Shiis in “Karbala, the filth-ridden city, and in Najaf, the city of polytheism,” was interpreted as the intention to desecrate the two holiest Shiit sites and to massacre the Shi population in these two holy cities (“Baghdad Launches Air Strikes on Insurgents in Mosul,” 2014). The Iranian government apparently also feared the potential appeal of Salafi-jihadi ideology to local Sunnis in Iran, many of whom lived in the country’s poorest regions of Baluchistan and Kurdistan, and harbor a deep sense of deprivation.

In addition to military measures against ISIS, primarily the establishment of the Shii Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq and active support for the Assad regime in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen, Iran launched a massive campaign of polemics and propaganda against the Saudi Wahhabis and the Salafi-jihadi organizations, primarily to drive a wedge between them and the Sunni mainstream. The propaganda war against the Wahhabis was not a new phenomenon in Shii history, but in recent years there has been a significant change. In the past, Shii polemical literature bore a defensive character, intended to prove that Shii religious beliefs and practices did not deviate from the laws or spirit of Islam, and there was therefore no basis for Wahhabi denunciation as apostates. As Shii self-confidence increased since the start of the current century, and in particular since the Arab upheaval, Shii polemics began to attack Wahhabism itself as a distortion from normative Islam. The central Shii argument, which to a large extent targeted mainstream Sunnis, attacked Wahhabi and Salafi-jihadi extremism, according to which any Muslim who did not accept their distorted perceptions was an apostate to be killed. The Shiis claimed that this approach contradicted the Qur’an and the consensus accepted by all Sunni scholars. As Shii self-confidence increased since the start of the current century, and in particular since the Arab upheaval, Shii polemics began to attack Wahhabism itself as a distortion from normative Islam.

The most striking resemblance between the two streams, according to Shii spokesmen, is their intolerance and the rejection of the beliefs of most Muslims, but mainly the Shiis. The emphasis on this theme was aimed particularly at the strong aversion among mainstream Sunnis to the condemnation of ordinary Muslims as apostates, even if they have violated Islamic laws. The Salafi-jihadis consider themselves superior to all other Muslims, particularly around the principle that real Islamic rule derives only from God. They claimed that there were always different interpretations of Islam, and therefore denouncing another Muslim as an apostate is contrary to Islamic tradition. Therefore not only were the Wahhabi and Salafi concepts without foundation in Islam; they also dragged Muslims into a vicious cycle of violence (“What are the Similarities and Differences between the Thought of ISIS and Wahhabism?” 2014). Significantly, the Shii propaganda did not use the word Salafi to refer to Sunni jihadist organizations, since this term also has positive significance for mainstream Sunnis, who revere the “righteous forefathers” (al-salaf al-salih) of the first generations. Instead, they used the term Wahhabis to link them to Saudi Arabia, and particularly used the derogatory term takfiri, meaning someone who declares other Muslims as apostates. The description of the Wahhabis and Salafi-jihadi streams as deviating from the Islamic path automatically made the Shiis integral members, if not the main representatives, of “true” Islam.

Thus Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, then-head of the Iranian judiciary authority at the time, argued that Wahhabism was the driving force behind the takfiri groups, since true Islam could not create “garbage (zebalahha)” like ISIS.” According to the official website of the Qom seminary, it was enough to look at their attitude to Muslims in general and at their crimes to see that ISIS is a Wahhabi terrorist group “Impossible that True Islam could Produce such Rubbish like ISIS,” 2015; “ISIS is Wahhabism’s Other Face,” n.d.).

The most striking resemblance between the two streams, according to Shii spokesmen, is their intolerance and the rejection of the beliefs of most Muslims, but mainly the Shiis. The emphasis on this theme was aimed particularly at the strong aversion among mainstream Sunnis to the condemnation of ordinary Muslims as apostates, even if they have violated Islamic laws. The Salafi-jihadis consider themselves superior to all other Muslims, and
they are determined to impose their views with the “sword of takfīr” (Mustafa & Mustafa, 2016).

The 2014 International Conference on Radical and Takfiri Movements compared the conduct of the Salafi-jihadis to the behavior of the Khawarij sect, which has been reviled since the early days of Islam and is hated by mainstream Sunni because they focus on their Muslim enemies instead of external enemies. Two senior clerics, Naser Makarem Shirazi and Ja`far Sobhani, claimed that the modern takfīris were worse than the Khawarij, since the latter were acting out of ignorance and mistaken beliefs, while the modern takfīris are the product of plotting by the enemies of Islam. Moreover, their crimes such as the mass killings of non-combatants, selling of women as sex slaves, and the destruction of holy sites, are far worse than the crimes of the Khawarij. Other speakers compared the takfīris to the Mongols—the symbol of cruelty in Muslim history “Look at the Various Dimensions,” 2014).

Another striking rhetorical motif presented the Wahhabis and the Salafi-jihadis as ignorant people guided by obscurantist thinking, in complete contrast to the logic and rationalism that guide Islam in general and Shiism in particular. Wahhabism sprouted in the Najd region in Eastern Arabia, which was “devoid of civilization and lacking culture,” and had never known the wealth and depth of Islamic culture (Qazvini, 2013, p. 76). It is not surprising that the founder of the sect, Muhammad ibn-Abd al-Wahhab (died 1792) lacked any knowledge of theology, philosophy, or the principles of Muslim law (Rajayi Borujni, 2016). The simplistic world view of Wahhabism led its followers to reject scientific discoveries and improvements that Islam had always welcomed, and exposed them to many internal contradictions. Therefore, Wahhabi propaganda is unable to persuade anyone through rational arguments, and it only succeeds among the ignorant, who are intellectually inferior and attracted to money (“Stagnation in Wahhabism’s Thought,” 2013).

Internal contradictions are also widespread among the Salafi-jihadis. Although they claim to be returning to original Islam, their teaching is actually a reprehensible innovation (bid`a) and deviation from the path of the Prophet, for whom no Muslim who had uttered the declaration of faith (shahada) could never be declared an apostate (“Scholarly Charter,” 2012). The meaning is clear: not only have the Salafi-jihadis invented new practices that have no precedent in normative Islam; they are also liars and hypocrites who pretend to be following the early Muslims. Contrary to Salafi-jihadi fanaticism, the Shii spokesmen present their movement as the flag bearers of tolerance and pluralism in Islam.

A blatant expression of Salafi-jihadi ignorance and distortion of Islamic law is, according to the Shii writers, their encouragement and practice of “sexual jihād” (jihādal-nikāḥ) in other words the ISIS propaganda encouraging Muslim women to travel to Syria in order to marry ISIS members fighting the Assad regime and grant them sexual favors before they leave for battle (“How was Wahhabism Formed,” 2014). According to the Shii spokesmen, not just this custom, but ISIS criminal treatment of women in its entirety is contrary to the Qur’an and the spirit of Islam, and proves that their main motivation is not Islam but pure egoism (Mustafa & Mustafa, 2016; “Scholarly Charter,” 2012).

One of the worst Salafi-jihadi sins, according to the Shii narrative, is deflecting the popular uprising in Arab countries, which was essentially an Islamic and anti-American uprising, to violent hostility between Sunnis and Shiis, at a time when the Islamic umma faced extremely serious threats from the external enemy. Ayatollah Sobhani even accused the jihadists of causing

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rifts in Muslim countries in order to pave the way for a (Western) crusader and Zionist attack on Muslims (Sobhani, 2009, pp. 8-9, 111-113). For Khamenei, the unforgivable crime of the takfiri movement was shifting the frontline of the Islamic struggle from the borders of occupied Palestine to the streets of Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, and Libya. Other spokesmen criticized the Salafi-jihadis for avoiding attacks on Israel while fighting the Shiis. (“Takfiris are the Objective Symbol of Sufyani’s Deviation,” 2014; Supreme Leader’s full speech, 2014). Senior clerics complained that the takfiris created a distorted image of Islam as violent in nature, while Islam is “known for its mercy, wisdom and logic.” Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi accused them of tarnishing the image of Islam all over the world, and of thereby aiding the Zionists, while Ayatollah Husayni Bushari accused them of deliberately encouraging Islamophobia worldwide (“Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi,” 2016).

The Enemies of Shiism: The Jews and the West

One of the most effective rhetorical tools in intra-Islamic polemics has always been to identify the internal opponent with an external enemy, principally the Jews, and in modern times, also the West. According to Steven Wasserstrom, it is hard to find any deviating Muslim sect that has not been accused at one time or another of having Jewish origins (Wasserstrom, 2014, p. 154). The attribution of a Jewish source to non-orthodox sects absolves the “true” Muslims from responsibility for the internal disputes in Islam. At the same time it shames the “deviants” by linking them with a despised external “other” — it Judaizes them and vilifies the Jews as the enemies of Islam. The Shiis have themselves been the victims of such charges by the Sunnis (Wasserstrom, 2014, p. 158), and now level similar accusations against the Wahhabi and Salafi-jihadi opponents. This attitude also feeds into the widespread attraction of conspiracy theories in the Arab and Iranian political culture, to explain a complex and hard-to-accept reality by attributing it to powerful hidden forces.

Conflating the historical enemies Wahhabis and Jews aims to highlight their evil nature and explain their hatred for the Shiis as a kind of late revenge for past defeats suffered by the Jews. It also heightens the belief that the fate of Zionism will be like the fate of those Jews from the days of the Prophet.

According to the Shii narrative, the British implanted the Wahhabi “cancerous tumor” in the region as part of their broader imperialist design against Islam. A central element of the British plan to take control of the Persian Gulf was to break Islamic unity by encouraging revolts in the Ottoman Empire and undermining the harmonious coexistence between Sunna and Shia, and their agents found in Muhammad ibn-Abd al-Wahhab a partner and tool to realize their plot (“Wahhabism in the Service of the Enemies of Islam,” n.d.; “English Goals in Creating the Wahhabi sect,” n.d.). The British-Wahhabi cooperation peaked during the period of the founder of the modern Saudi kingdom, Abd el-Aziz ibn Saud (died 1954), and his consent to hand over Palestine to the Zionists in 1948, while in return the British helped him to conquer the entire Arabian Peninsula (“Sa’ud Family Strategy regarding the Zionist Regime,” 2015; “Sa’ud Family Betrayal of Palestine and the Muslims,” n.d.). Even worse, the Shii spokesmen discovered that the origin of Muhammad ibn-Abd al-Wahhab and the Saudi dynasty was in fact Jewish. In one version, the Saud family is descended from a Jewish tribe, Banu Qaynuqa, that fought the Prophet Muhammad in Medina, and according to another version, their ancestors were among the residents of the Khaybar oasis who were defeated by Ali, father of the Shia, in 628 (“The Sa`ud Family are Jews,” n.d.; “Fars: The Ancestors of the Sa`ud Family are the Jews of Khaybar,” 2015). The Jewish connection was also expressed in the popular call “O the Saud
family, O the family of Jews,” that was heard at many anti-Wahhabi conferences, and also in the moniker *Sahyun that links the name Saud with Zion* (Qasemi, 2016). Conflating the historical enemies Wahhabis and Jews aims to highlight their evil nature and explain their hatred for the Shiis as a kind of late revenge for past defeats suffered by the Jews. It also heightens the belief that the fate of Zionism will be like the fate of those Jews from the days of the Prophet.

Presenting the *takfiri* organizations as the product of a Western plot was a common motif in Khamenei’s speeches. He argued that although the *takfiri* approach was not new and had a long history, nevertheless “criminal organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS were created” by the imperialist enemies—America, Great Britain, and the Zionist regime—in order to divide the peoples. The *takfiri* movements have an Islamic facade, but in fact these organizations and the regimes that support them (that is, the Saudis) are working in the service of the Americans, the European imperialists, and the Zionists. Spokesmen for the regime explain that the purpose behind the West’s establishment of the *takfiri* groups was “to destroy the real image of Islam,” to weaken the Islamic umma, and to fight the “Islamic awakening.” ISIS was used to distract the world’s attention from the crimes of the Americans and the Zionists against Muslims (Masalkhazada, 2014; “What is the Reason for ISIS Attack on Iraq?” 2014). These accusations enabled Khamenei to present Iran and the Shia as the positive polar opposite of the *takfiri* stream, and this also explained the *takfiri* hostility toward them.

While Khamenei accused the United States of being behind ISIS, several clerics charged Israel with similar crimes, and called ISIS a “Zionist project.” Other spokesmen pointed to the “American-Zionist nature” of the *takfiri* groups, which aligns with the Zionist approach of damaging Iran’s efforts to promote Muslim unity. The cruelty of ISIS toward Muslims, which has no basis in the tradition of Islam, Christianity, or any other religion, derives from the Jewish Torah and Talmud. ISIS is implementing ideas that the Zionists dictated but have not yet been able to carry out, they concluded (“Is ISIS the Black-Clothed Flagbearer?” 2014; “What were the Goals of the Zionist Project?” 2017). The Mashreq News Agency, which is affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards, adopted the claim that ISIS leader Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi was in fact an officer in the Israeli Mossad named Shimon Eilot (“Veterans Today,” 2014). On the basis of this story, the ISNA News Agency, using a play on words in Arabic, gave new meaning to the ISIS acronym: “The Israeli State of Iraq and Syria” (“ISIS are the Guardians of Israel,” 2014).

Invoking the Salafi, Zionist, and Western triangle exposed conflicting views among the various Shii spokesmen regarding the identity of the biggest threat to Islam. The official questions and answers website on Islamic practices, Islamquest, admitted that the Jews were Islam’s worst enemies in its early days, but now the Wahhabis are a greater danger (“Who is the Greatest Ideological Enemy of Islam?” 2014). Meanwhile, the final statement from the conference against extremists ranked the *takfiris* together with external enemies, namely the United States and the Zionists (“Scholarly Charter,” 2012). Khamenei for his part placed the *takfiri* stream in the broader context of historical threats that Islam faces. He therefore reached a different conclusion, claiming that although the *takfiris* and the Wahhabis are both fighting Iran and the Shia and have committed serious crimes, they are not Islam’s “main enemy.” This enemy is the one who conceived, sustained, and incite them and who created the rift between these “ignorant and uninformed groups and the oppressed Iranian nation,” and this enemy is above all the West, led by the United States (“Warning of the Supreme Leader,” 2014). The logic guiding Khamenei was clear. The Wahhabis and the Salafi-jihadis are killing Shiis, but they cannot defeat the Shiis or Iran, and their ideas do not appeal to young people in Iran. On the other hand, although Khamenei believed that
the historical defeat of the West in the long run was inevitable, he was far more worried by the allure of Western culture among young people and its inherent danger to the very existence of the Islamic idea and regime.

**Excluding the Takfiris from Islam**

The presentation of the takfiris as the handiwork of the West and the Zionists served to justify a more serious judgment removing them entirely from the boundaries of Islam. Makarem Shirazi, for example, contrasted true genuine Islam based on “prayer and submission to Allah the Merciful” and the takfiri religion based on bloodshed, destruction, and terror. This religion, he determined, is not Islam. During the conference against religious fanaticism in 2016 he declared that the takfiris were neither Sunnis nor Shiis, but a political movement with no connection to either of the important schools in Islam. In this context he added that all Islamic clerics must stand together and confirm that Wahhabis are not Muslims and have nothing in common with Islam (“Appropriate Instruments,” 2016).

Khamenei made use of another rhetorical tool to exclude the takfiris when he adopted the term “the new jahiliyyah,” which was introduced by the Sunni-Pakistani thinker Abu A’la Moududi and popularized by the Egyptian Salafi thinker Sayyid Qutb, and applied it to the conduct of the takfiris. Originally this term referred to Muslim societies that no longer lived according to the laws of Islam and had therefore returned to the period of barbarism and ignorance that preceded Islam. Khamenei highlighted the original meaning of the term jahiliyyah (barbarism) when he spoke of the spread of “cruelty” and “brutality” and “unbridled killing” by the takfiris. He presented the modern jahiliyyah as worse than the historical phenomenon, not only because of the use of modern weapons for mass murder but also because the Salafi-jihadi organizations lacked any moral inhibitions, when even “the idolaters of Mecca “ refrained from warfare in the holy month of Ramadan, while their modern heirs even breached this fundamental principle (“Modern Barbarity,” 2015).

The comparison between the Salafi-jihadi stream and the pagan Arabs and the claim that their conduct removed them from boundaries of Islam were the equivalent of defining them as heretics, which justifies declaring holy war (jihad) against them. The newspaper Jomhuriye Eslami, which is associated with the religious seminaries in Qom, even urged clerics from various Islamic streams to issue a joint fatwa defining the takfiri stream as heretical and specifying the penalty for those who “turn to the takfiri weapon” (Savion et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, senior clerics refrained from issuing such a fatwa, apparently due to past experience. Shii clerics have historically avoided declaring Sunnis to be apostates, since they understood it would be a mistake for a minority to arouse the anger of the majority by such a confrontationist way. Instead they presented the Sunnis as Muslims who have erred and should be drawn back into the Shii fold through propagation. Apparently they were also apprehensive that a declaration of heresy based on conduct could be used as a weapon against Shiism itself, as indeed happened with the Wahhabis.

Since the Salafi jihadis did not deny the Qur’an or the principal tenets of Islamic belief, senior Sunni clerics, led by al-Azhar University in Egypt, refused to declare them apostates, although they criticized their actions (Gabra, 2016). Shii clerics acted in the same way, apparently fearing that such a declaration would harm their efforts to form an alliance with the central Sunni stream against these organizations, leaving them alone in their fight. They preferred to use the less binding term “non-Muslims,” that is, people who were never Muslims and are placed outside the boundaries of Islam—an approach that enabled the Shii to call for jihad against them. They took a similar
line against Saddam Hussein after Iraq invaded Iran in 1981, when they defined him as *taghut*, an idolatrous tyrant, thus sidestepping the Islamic ban on declaring jihad against other Muslims (Gieling, 1999, pp. 44, 76).

The growing strength of the Shii-Iranian axis of resistance was a serious factor in the decision by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in the summer of 2020 to normalize relations with Israel, as a way of improving the regional balance of power, particularly in the Persian Gulf.

Ayatollah Kazem Ha’iri was the first to issue a *fatwa*, when on November 18, 2013 he defined the war of the Lebanese Hezbollah against the Sunni rebels in Syria as a conflict between the defense of Islam and heresy, or in other words, as a religious commandment (“Ruling of Ayatollah Kazem Ha’iri,” 2013). In June 2014, after ISIS conquered Mosul, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of the leading Shii scholars in Iraq, issued a *fatwa* calling on all fit men to enlist in the struggle against the ISIS “terrorists” in order to defend the soil of Iraq, the Islamic umma, and the religious sanctities. His *fatwa* stated that in accordance with the laws of jihad, anyone killed fighting ISIS will be deemed a martyr (*shahid*). Muqtada al-Sadr, an Iraqi Shii leader whose religious status was far below that of al-Sistani, followed him and issued a similar *fatwa* a few months later (“Ayatollah Sistani Issued a Ruling of Jihad,” 2014; “Muqtada Sadr’s Jihad Ruling,” 2014). While Khamenei did not publish an official *fatwa* declaring a jihad against the Salafi-jihadis, he continued to call for an all-out struggle against them. Khamenei defined ISIS as “a cancerous tumor” created by the enemies—a metaphor he used against Israel, indicating not only the resemblance between the two enemies of Shiism, but also, taking into account the only effective treatment of cancerous tumors, the proper end of both of them (“Bringing the U.S. to its Knees,” 2017). These declarations, which deviated from the traditional Shii line due to the sense of the threat posed by ISIS, to a great extent marked the closing of a historical circle, when the Shii religious discourse that was originally driven by Shii fear of exclusion from Islam ended with their declaration of their Wahhabi-Salafi opponents as an anti-Islamic enemy to be fought and destroyed.

**Conclusion**

The increasing importance of the Sunni-Shii conflict within the Arab Spring has severely undermined Iran’s ambitions to establish itself, with the consent of the Sunni majority, as the leader of the Muslim world. The need to contain the harm of the Sunni-Shii rift has obligated the Shii leadership, with Iran at the helm, to sharpen their ideological and political responses. Some of the responses, mainly the revoking of anti-Sunni practices, required efforts against deeply rooted popular customs, and were not entirely successful. They also revealed the gap between the doctrine and policy of the regime and popular undercurrents of Islam in Iran.

The other type of response, namely the attack on the doctrines and conduct of the Wahhabi and Salafi-jihadi groups, reflect on the one hand the sense of dread in view of the physical threat posed by these movements to the Shiis in Iraq, Lebanon, and Pakistan. On the other hand, the nature of the attack also reflects confidence, particularly among the Iranians, replacing the defensive Shii line of the past. A central motif of this line of action places the responsibility for sectarian hostility in Islam on external enemies, led by the United States and Zionism, and attempts to create a united Muslim front against them. The second motif stresses the proximity between mainstream Sunna and Shiism, while the Wahhabi and Salafi-jihadi movements are characterized as deviants and the enemies of all Muslims. This approach also positions the Shiis as the ultimate representative of “pure Islam.” Here too there is a major effort to identify the internal enemy with external enemies, to present it as their handiwork and
as serving their interests. In this context there is a notable attempt to attribute a Jewish origin to the internal enemy of Islam. The pinnacle of this effort is the presentation of these enemies as apostates, which justifies the declaration of jihad to defeat and eliminate them. In this way the Shiis close a historical circle, evolving from a minority defending themselves against charges of heresy to presenting themselves as the upholders of pure Islam, and leaders of the military and ideological effort to fight Islam’s internal enemies.

The growing strength of the Shii-Iranian axis of resistance was a serious factor in the decision by the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in the summer of 2020 to normalize relations with Israel, as a way of improving the regional balance of power, particularly in the Persian Gulf. They were careful not to present the move in public as directed against Iran and the Shiis, but their intention was clear to Iran, which therefore responded strongly, although it was careful not to refer to the Sunni-Shii enmity but to present itself as defending the interests of the Palestinians and Muslims in general. In a September 2020 speech, Khamenei criticized the decision as “treason against the Islamic world” and expressed his certainty that it would not survive long (al-Monitor, 2020). The Iranian Foreign Ministry was more scathing and criticized the accords with Israel as “strategic stupidity” that would only strengthen opposition to Israel. A Foreign Office spokesman even predicted that “the unjust shedding of Palestinian blood over the past seven decades of Israeli occupation [i.e., since 1948] will sooner or later catch up with those who betrayed the Palestinians” (“Israel Agreement,” 2020). The head of the Armed Forces HQ General Muhammad Bakri exposed some of the Iranian fears when he warned the UAE that Iran would not tolerate even the slightest damage to its security as a result of this move and that it would hold the UAE fully responsible (“Chief of General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces” 2020). However, the various Iranian spokesmen did not specify what Iran intended to do in order to thwart normalization, in line with Khamenei’s cautious approach to foreign policy.

Ultimately, Iran’s open support for the Syrian regime’s cruel suppression of its mainly Sunni population, and its support for both the Shii militias in Iraq, who have dealt harshly with Iraqis, and for the Houthis in Yemen who fire rockets at Saudi Arabia, will have a greater impact on the religious rift between Sunnis and Shii in the Arab world for the foreseeable future than Iran’s self-righteous proclamations of Islamic unity.

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The Civil State vs. the Secular State in Arab Discourse: Egypt as a Case Study

Limor Lavie and Abdallah Shalaby

This article is the result of collaboration between the authors, one a researcher from Bar Ilan University who deals with state-religion relations in Egypt, and the second an Egyptian sociologist, a lecturer at Ain Shams University and one of the founders of a new movement calling for secularism in Egypt. The article proposes a contextual analysis of the principle ideas of this secularization movement, as presented by Shalaby at the annual conference of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Tel Aviv University in May 2020. The article analyzes the emergence of the secularization movement in contemporary Egypt, its demands for change, and its weight in public discourse, and considers the difference between the call for secularism and the more common calls in the Arab world since the Arab Spring for the establishment of civil states.

Keywords: Egypt, secularization, civil state, secularism, religion, religion-state relations, Islam, Arab Spring
Introduction
A movement has emerged recently in Egypt calling for the secularization of society and of state institutions. Egyptian sociologist Abdallah Shalaby, a lecturer at the Ain Shams University and one of the founders of the movement, presented his ideas at the annual conference of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Tel Aviv University held in May 2020 (see excerpts from his lecture, translated into English, below). The initiative advocates the privatization of religion, that is to say, its removal from the public sphere and its preservation in the private sphere only (Casanova, 1994, pp. 12-17).

This is an unusual initiative. Demands of this nature to diminish the influence of clerics or religious institutions on decision making and management of political, economic, social, or cultural affairs are not new in Egypt (Hatina, 2007). However, Shalaby and his movement seek to change the fundamental relations between religion and state, by turning religion from regimist religion to public religion, and annulling the legal status of Islam as the state religion, an idea that is taboo. Following the ideas of Murad Wahba and Fuad Zakariyya, among the leaders of the secular current in Cairo, they demand the secularization of Egypt and not just its transformation into a civil state (dawla madanīyya).

A “civil state” is an elusive concept: while it refers to a non-religious state, it is also used by Islamist movements—albeit not in a secular sense—as they promote the establishment of a state based on religious law (Magued, 2000). The idea of a civil state has gained a foothold in the Arab public and political discourse, as a post-secular model that departs from the familiar dichotomy of religiosity versus secularism. Alternatively, it is located along the spectrum between these two extremes, seeking to create a synthesis between Islamic and Arab cultural particularism and modern Western norms and patterns. This contrasts with the opinion of Barbara De Poli, who considers use of the term civil state an attempt to avoid expressing explicit support for a model of a secular or religious state (De Poli, 2014).

The ideal state: a reformed nation state where public order is governed by modern patterns of governance, such as popular sovereignty, parliamentarism, pluralism, and civic equality, without marginalizing Muslim religion, history, and culture.

The term civil state was born out of the absence of a Western term suitable for the state model that many in the Arab world seek. The term “secular state” is considered derogatory, another way of saying a country with Western permissiveness that is anti-religious, even atheist; and the term “religious state” has a negative connotation of a repressive medieval European Christian state or the Iranian Shiite state after the Islamic Revolution. Consequently, the term “civil state” is more and more common in the Arab world today—and especially since the Arab Spring—to describe the ideal state: a reformed nation state where public order is governed by modern patterns of governance, such as popular sovereignty, parliamentarism, pluralism, and civic equality, without marginalizing Muslim religion, history, and culture (Lavie, 2016). This essay seeks to examine the implications of the growing calls in the Arab world at large and in Egypt in particular for the establishment of a civil state, and to examine how they differ from the goals of the new secularization movement.

From the Sidelines to the Mainstream: The Idea of a Civil State in Egypt
Until the 1980s, there were only sporadic calls for the establishment of a civil state in Egypt. The idea then was a complete separation between religion and state, and the calls were the domain of only a few—mostly foreign diplomats, Christian intellectuals, liberals, and reformist clerics. Thus the term was not
accepted in the public at large and in Islamic circles in particular. From the 1980s, the term became more and more common, both among liberal and Islamist intellectuals. The liberals used the term civil state to soften the antagonistic call for secularization. They did not talk about separation of religion and state, but about narrowing the role of religion in politics and of preserving its status in education and culture. Islamists, on the other hand, adopted the term, but with a different meaning. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 tarnished the image of the Islamic state that Islamic groups had raised on a pedestal. Islamic intellectuals were thus pushed into adopting the terminology of a civil state as part of their political theory in an attempt to disavow the religious state in the Iranian Shiite sense, a state ruled by a religious cleric (wilāyat al-faqīh). To this end they developed the argument that the Sunni Islamic state is ruled by a civil leader (as opposed to a religious cleric who rules by a divine right), and thus the state is civil and not religious. This is not a secular state, as there is no renunciation of Islam as the overall system regulating life in all fields, including legislation and governance (Lavie, 2016).

From the early 2000s, the Muslim Brotherhood removed its prolonged opposition to the civil state and adopted the concept to its official platform, after Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the greatest Sunni jurists, declared his adherence to it (Harnisch & Mecham, 2009; Kamali, 2005; Lavie, 2017). Islamists often emphasize that they advocate a “civil state with an Islamic source of authority,” a qualification added to emphasize that this does not mean a secular state, but rather a non-religious state in the theocratic sense only, without relinquishing the notion that shariʿa is the source of authority for the laws of the state, and that Western forms of government are acceptable only if they are consistent with shariʿa principles. Proponents of the “civil state” in the sense of both separating religion from politics and full civic equality, and proponents of the “civil state with an Islamic source of authority” disagree on the source of authority for decision making and legislation (religious or non-religious), but they agree on adoption of elements of modern rule, such as a regular government turnover, democratic elections, separation of powers, rule of law, sovereignty of the people, parliamentarism, party pluralism, and more.

The differences between the Islamist and the liberal-civil currents over the concept of a civil state were particularly pronounced after the downfall of President Mubarak in the January 2011 uprising, when it became clear that the dispute over the orientation of the post-revolutionary state was far wider than any common denominator. When Egypt sought to formulate a new constitution, the Islamists blocked any attempt to define Egypt as a civil state in the constitution, as occurred in Tunisia (Lavie, 2018, 2019), out of concern that this term would be understood as a secular state. In 2011, a first attempt of this kind led by the military administration (SCAF), which ruled Egypt until the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, was blocked by mass demonstrations by supporters of the Islamist current. The 2014 constitution formulated after the ousting of President Morsi also failed to achieve agreement over the definition of Egypt as a civil state because of opposition by the Salafis. Instead, as a compromise, a more toned down and less prominent formulation was adopted. Egypt was defined in the preamble only as a “state with a civil government.”

However in 2019, under President el-Sisi, another step was taken toward anchoring Egypt’s civil nature in the constitution. The amended constitution now states that the role of the army is to preserve the “civil character of the state” (madaniyyat al-dawla). Thus, de jure, it is stated that Egypt is a civil state, and that the army is the guarantor of the country’s non-religious nature. This clause signals that it is the army’s duty to prevent the return to power of Islamist forces, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, who wish to give the state a religious character.
This amendment to the constitution was made possible despite the opposition of the Salafi party, after the Egyptian parliament authorized a formal interpretation of the concept of madaniyyat al-dawla, which clarifies that even though Egypt declares itself a civil state, the meaning is not a secular state (“Legislative Committee of Representatives,” 2019). In July 2020, the amendment to the constitution was ratified in a law that determines the process for decision making in the event of danger to the civil character of the state (Al-Ashwal, 2020).

The grounding of Egypt’s civil character in the constitution and law, as well as the entrenchment of the civil state concept in the wider public discourse, does not involve secularization processes. The steps taken by el-Sisi are not intended to ban religion from the public arena or to abolish the involvement of the religious establishment in political and social life. The religious establishment continues to exist under the Sisi regime, sometimes subject to the President and his dictates, and sometime in conflict with him. Thus, for example, in 2015, against the backdrop of the establishment of the Islamic State (IS) and Egypt’s battle with terrorists from the Sinai Peninsula operating in the name of IS, el-Sisi made the al-Azhar religious institution exclusively responsible for the renewal of the religious discourse, through a critical examination of canonical Islamic texts, their reinterpretation, and adaption to the needs of the hour. Al-Azhar worked to neutralize the voices of the radicals in public discourse, denouncing terrorism and encouraging reforms and tolerance in educational curricula, but without abandoning its conservative positions, for example on the issue of the status of women and political and religious freedoms, and without including other participants in the process who were eager to contribute, such as intellectuals and academics (Yefet, 2017). Recent tensions have been evident between the regime and al-Azhar to the point where the regime has considered separating the Dār al-Iftāʾ body that issues religious edicts, which has traditionally been subordinate to al-Azhar, and placing it under government patronage as a more disciplined religious institution (“Law Regulaing Dār al-Iftāʾ,” 2020). El-Sisi’s efforts were not aimed at secularization, but at de-Ikhwanization and de-Islamization, in other words, the exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood and the annulment of steps the Brotherhood took during their year in power in Egypt that were aimed at strengthening the Islamic character of the state.

The call for a civil state is a call for law enforcement, public order, personal security, and the eradication of corruption and crime. It is a call for a state that is not a failed state.

The Perception of the Civil State in the Arab world

Calls for the establishment of a civil state are common not just in Egypt. In Iraq, for example, the main slogan sounded during mass demonstrations in 2015 protesting power outages and demanding cuts to the salaries of elected officials was “bread, freedom, and a civil state” (khubz, hurrīyya, dawla madaniyya) (Alnaher, 2015). The expression “civil state” here replaces the term “social justice” (ʿadāla ītimāʿīyya) or (karāma insānīyya) that was a slogan in various uprisings in the Arab world over the past decade. The origin of the slogan lay in demonstrations to bring down Morsi in Egypt in 2012, in part in the name of a civil state, but took on relevant implications for the specific circumstances of Iraqi society (Al-Saadawi, 2013; ‘Asfur, 2013). In this instance, the civil state means primarily a state with functioning institutions and working services, i.e., a state capable of providing the basic needs of its citizens. The call for a civil state is a call for law enforcement, public order, personal security, and the eradication of corruption and crime. It is a call for a state that is not a failed state. It is also a call for a regime that is not a regime of political Islam, the military, or a confessional
system where senior positions are divided among the major religious and ethnic sub-communities. (Al-ʿAlī, 2017; Nāṣir, 2016; Riḍā, 2016). In similar fashion, Lebanese president Michel Aoun recently called for Lebanon to be declared a civil state (“Lebanon’s President,” 2020).

Even in Saudi Arabia, which is often considered a purist religious state where the regime derives its legitimacy from this ideal, there have been calls over the past 15 years for the establishment of a civil state. The 9/11 attacks, which featured many Saudis among the terrorists who planned and carried out the attacks, and al-Qaeda’s terrorist activities in Saudi Arabia itself since 2003, have ignited not only external criticism of the kingdom and calls for it to re-examine its Wahhabi foundations, but also an internal dialogue encouraged by the King aimed at clearing Saudi Arabia’s reputation and permanently erasing its image as fertile ground for the growth of terrorists (Dekmejian, 2003, p. 400). Against this background, there have been calls for liberalization, including calls to adopt the model of a civil state (Al-Ghāmdī, 2006). The question of whether Saudi Arabia is a religious state resurfaced with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, which sparked a region-wide discourse on the desired state model and the need for a new social contract between the state and its citizens (Al-Dakhīl, 2011; ʿAdnān, 2014).

The rise of IS in 2014 further nurtured the calls against a religious state in favor of a civil state, as the answer to the radical version of an Islamic state (Bunzel, 2016). Saudi Arabia’s position at the head of the alliance with Egypt, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates directed against the Turkish-Qatari axis that has supported the Muslim Brotherhood since its removal from power in Egypt in 2013 also contributed to these calls. The civil state in this instance stands opposed to those states that support the Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Rashid, 2020). The call for a civil state in Saudi Arabia is not a call for a secular state or even for a state of all its citizens providing equal rights to minorities, in particular Shiites. It is directed first and foremost at diminishing the influence of the clerics and the religious institutions in politics, state institutions, and education. This is a demand for the abolition of the state monopoly over religious discourse; it is a demand to enable pluralism, the growth of a civil society, and a shared national culture. These are calls for modernization and reform under the shade of “civil Islam” (Gerges, 2013).

In contrast to Egypt and Tunisia, such voices have not as yet received backing from the regime, but have been rejected repeatedly by the clerics close to the palace (“Mufti of Saudi Arabia,” 2012; Al-Saʿīdī, 2011). These clerics, whom Quintan Wiktorowicz calls the “quietist (ʿulamāʾ) clerics” (Ismail, 2019, p. 169), adhere to the claim that a civil state is opposed to Islam because it deprives it of control over the regime, legislation, the judiciary, and morals and conduct, and leaves it only in control of matters of personal status (marriage, divorce and inheritance) and worship. They reject the concept of “a civil state with an Islamic source of authority,” as it narrows the sovereignty of shariʿa to legislation only and denies its role as the framework for all state mechanisms (Al-Burayk, 2016).

The concept of the civil state in Saudi Arabia is the domain of the liberal current, which is negligible in scope. It includes figures such as Muhammad al-Qahtani and Abdullah Hamed, and a few modernist clerics (civil sheikhs) (Okruhlik, 2005, p. 204), such as Salman al-Oudah and Ali al-Omari (Al-ʿAwda, 2012, p. 127). Madawi al-Rasheed describes this group as “a minority that has carved a space for itself in the public sphere” and “who present their society with an alternative third way, between the radical Salafi-jihadi movement and the acquiescent official Salafi trend” (al-Rasheed, 2016, p. 2). They are not organized as a cohesive movement, they have not received authority or official political-institutional support, and furthermore, most of them are today either in jail or remain silent.
However, it is possible that a change in the attitude of the monarchical regime to the idea of a civil state is underway. Although a civil state is not part of the Vision 2030 program of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), since 2017 the Saudi media—even the more conservative branch, which seeks to glorify him and the liberal reforms that he has begun to promote, especially with regard to permission for women to drive, encouragement of leisure activity, and the reduced role of the modesty police—portrays Saudi Arabia under the leadership of MBS as a civil state marching forward to modernity and shunning its title as a religious state with a primitive and failed character (Al-Kindī, 2020).

From Civil to Secular State: The Initiative of the al-Miṣriyyin Organization for Secularization
Meir Hatina showed that up to the 1990s civil state proponents were on the margins of the consensus in Egypt (Hatina, 2000, p. 58). Today, the concept of a civil state is mainstream in many, though not all, Arab states. There are disagreements as to how the concept should be interpreted, and it has a local indigenous character in each country depending on socio-political circumstances, the type of regime, and the model of the religion and state relationship. Pure secular ideas along the lines of the ideas of Fuad Zakariyya, one of the prominent advocates of secularization in Egypt in the 1980s and 1990s, are not commonplace. The ideas of Shalaby and his associates in the movement for the secularization of Egypt, which appear below, must be read with this background in mind. They represent very narrow margins only, but raising such ideas is easier than in the past thanks to several factors.

First, the contained meteoric rise of Islamist forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis in the post-Arab Spring era created a comfortable environment for secular ideas. When Islamist voices are silenced by violent repression, political exclusion, or co-option, secular ideas voiced in public will presumably not elicit a counter-reaction from conservative movements. In this climate where Islamic movements have been defeated and are submissive, ideas at the left of the spectrum ranging between religion and secularism can be raised without provoking overt antagonism at the right end of the spectrum.

Second, the liberal current has declined in strength and lost credibility, and thus needs to justify its existence in new ways or to find itself a new source of legitimacy. The liberals’ support for the anti-democratic military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood, which came to power in Egypt in democratic elections, proved that those who call themselves liberals are willing to accept military rule operating with anti-liberal means, so long as this protects the civil (non-religious) nature of the state and prevents an Islamist monopoly on defining the state’s identity and future. With the calls for liberalization and democratization no longer convincing, alternative ideas have joined the agenda of rationalist intellectuals.

Third, Shalaby’s remarks oppose el-Sisi’s measures to constitutionalize and codify Egypt’s civil-ness. Shalaby wishes to generate deeper change in Egypt with respect to the place of religion: not to suffice with excluding the Islamists and annulling their political achievements, but to declare explicitly the intent to secularize society and to translate this into practical steps. Only thus, in his view, will Egypt become a democracy, as secularization is a necessary and critical precondition.

Egypt in the 21st Century: A Civil State or a Secular State? Measures Required to Secularize the State and Society
From a lecture by Dr. Abdallah Shalaby
Distinguished friends and participants, I send you my gratitude and appreciation from Cairo and wish to thank especially the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Tel Aviv University and my dear friend, Dr. Ofir Winter, for giving
me the opportunity to speak to you. Allow me first to present to you a few key ideas necessary to understand my remarks. These ideas constitute the essence of the initiative to support secularization and a civil state in Egypt, of which I have been one of the architects since mid-2019....

Whoever wishes to understand the developments of the 21st century, not only in Egypt and the Middle East, but throughout the world, must understand the significance of Islamic terrorism, and in order to do so, must understand that terrorism is the gravest stage [on the scale] of Islamic fundamentalism.

Whoever wishes to understand the developments of the 21st century, not only in Egypt and the Middle East, but throughout the world, must understand the significance of Islamic terrorism, and in order to do so, must understand that terrorism is the gravest stage [on the scale] of Islamic fundamentalism. How is this so?

The first stage [on this scale] is the refusal to understand Islamic texts rationally, arguing that their meaning is literally clear and does not require the intellect. The second stage, derived from the first, is the stage of ruling by consensus (ijmāʿ) where common sense is obliterated, along with the [possibility] of interpreting these texts beyond their literal meaning (taʾwil), and on this basis issuing religious rulings (ṣijīḥād). The third stage, which derives from the ijmāʿ, is the stage of accusing anyone who opposes it as a heretic against Islam (takfīr). The final stage is that of terror, including violence, killing, and destruction. All these stages necessarily lead to the view of modern societies, in the absence of God’s sovereignty, as un-Islamic (jāhilīyya). From here emerges the ostensible obligation to judge these societies, with their publics and regimes, and declare them infidels, as they corrupt life and religion. These societies should consequently be overturned through violence and jihad, which is a fundamental obligation and religious duty in Islam. This duty also stems from the false claim that members of Islamic terrorist organizations alone hold the absolute truth and are obligated by heaven to kill those on earth [infidels in their eyes], committing crimes such as murder, destruction, and sabotage, on the religious pretext that they fulfill God’s will. In my opinion, this is an immoral claim that is contradictory to belief in God.

In the face of the fundamentalist danger and the false claims of Islamic fundamentalists to hold the absolute truth, secularism stands as a counter-current of thought and a defensive force against Islamic fundamentalism....In my opinion, secularism (ʾalmānīyya) is a language. The origin of the word in Arabic is from the word for world (ʾālam)—[and not from the word for science (ʿilm) as some people claim], the world associated with the changing times. Secularism is a path and a world view that encourages thinking about nature, society, and man from a relative and humanistic point of view and not from a perspective of absolute divinity....This definition of secularism implies expropriating from the hands of divine oversight all affairs of life—politics, economy, administration, government, and culture—and transferring religion from the public sphere to the private sphere, so that it will no longer have any control over any aspect of society, but over its disciples only. Then a different world view free of sanctity, a totally humanist perception, will rule. Religious practice and ideas will lose their importance and influence over social life in general, and their conduct will be subject to reason, science, and the will of free and rational people. What is intended is the dissociation of religious belief from controlling all aspects of life.

A group of Egyptian intellectuals came together in the Institution of Egyptians (Muʿassasat al-Miṣrīyyīn) which is among the civil society organizations in Egypt, and after deliberations launched an initiative that was at first called the Initiative Supporting Egypt as a Civil State. I was not happy with the use of the
word “civil” due to considerations that I will explain. We reached an agreement on the name the Initiative to Support a Secular Modern State, but out of political and social considerations, and a lack of courage, a number of colleagues requested that the name be changed to the Initiative for Support of a Secular Movement and a Civil State in Egypt. In my assessment, Egyptian society does not have any rooted and influential secular current for us to support.... We only have a fundamentalist Islamist current that has taken root and penetrated thought and practice in society and in the various state institutions in Egypt. Opposing this stream are individuals, small groups, and secular forums alone. Some have a headquarters or a meeting place and some exist only in a virtual form on internet websites. All in all, this is a random jumble and not a deep-rooted and effective secular stream. All these shreds of secular groupings cannot move from the virtual world to the real world, to gain a foothold among the Egyptian general public, and instill values, perceptions, and means of social action that will lead Egypt as a society and as a country to a path of total secularization.

The question I raised before my partners in the initiative was, is it their intention to demand a civil state or a secular state in Egypt. Those following the struggle between the secularists and the [Islamic] fundamentalists in Egypt can see that the secularists of various kinds stand alone against the Islamic current without any support from the state, whose constitution determines that it is a civil state and that its army is the defender of the constitution, the principles of democracy, and the civil character of the state (article 200 of the 2014 constitution following its amendment in 2019). However, in the absence of a substantive secular current in Egypt, I see the term “civil state” in this context a vague expression of ingratiation that creates erroneous opinions around this fateful issue, which is meant to define the future of Egyptian society...I believe that the term civil state (dawla madaniyya) does not provide a good enough response to the Islamic fundamentalist stream whose plans and demands to establish a religious state in Egypt are clear and defined, as a nucleus for the caliphate destined to rise when the Islamist fundamentalists seize power in Egypt. This movement is characterized by a high degree of organization and influence, while those who call for a civil state err in illusions reflecting their fear of the anger of the Islamist fundamentalists and regressive forces in Egyptian society.

In my opinion, the historic turning point at which the motherland now finds itself necessitates the daring and courage to demand a secular state and an initiative supporting the secularization of the modern state in Egypt. [Only] that way can Egyptian society get on a real democratic track, as in our view, democracy cannot exist without secularism. We, the founders of this initiative, understand full well the philosophic and rationalist nature at the heart of the liberal political view. Modern European rationalist philosophies were founded on the rejection of the right to rule by divine decree, and adopted concepts of secular rule, social contract, enlightenment, liberalism, and democracy. This advancement of human civilization was achieved in the West thanks to the abandonment of medieval concepts that for a long period tied the fate of the earth to the heavenly will. In the framework of this initiative, we propose dynamic steps and processes that must materialize simultaneously in order to increase awareness and critique among the Egyptian public, which in turn can lead to the formation of secularism in Egyptian society. It seems to me that a struggle for these demands, conditions, and processes [detailed below] and a serious and courageous debate regarding them may benefit the launch of secularization of Egypt as a state and as a society.

First, an enlightened and vital secular current must be established that extends beyond the enlightened and secular intellectual salons and beyond individuals and groups calling for secularism and enlightenment. Secularism must
become a substantive stream within Egyptian society that raises piercing questioning about the dominant Egyptian culture, which is primarily of a conservative and traditional nature. Such questions and the social objections this will foster could generate an important change in the mind of Egyptians, their perceptions, and dominant values, leading toward the secularization of state and society. This could establish the critical rationalist approach among Egyptians and lead to its adoption as their way of thinking about themselves and the world around them. The Egyptian education system must be developed at all levels in order to root out the culture of backwardness, superstition, and fear of change, and nurture the acquisition of knowledge and skepticism among the general public and the common man. All enlightened and secular groups, organizations, and individuals must reach out to and confront the masses at all levels, to integrate into Egyptian society and the state and all its institutions, at all meetings, forums, political parties, and civil society organizations dealing with the future of the motherland. They must also discuss the significance of enlightenment and secularism with them via social media. No short cuts should be taken and the state [mechanisms] should not be forgotten, especially those enlightened national elements in the institution of the presidency, as they have particular influence on education and the media.

Second, a new system for religious affairs must be formulated and established, one that will act to correct the way in which antiquated religious concepts are perceived. Based on a rational and open minded examination of the religious tradition (turāth) in its entirety, it should provide guidance on how religion and its expression should be understood in Egyptian daily life. We believe that religion is a social historic fact, and that since its emergence as part of the human experience and throughout its long history it has not constituted a single, complete, and harmonious entity. What we mean by this is the relativity of religiosity among human beings, which varies according to the circumstances of communities that believe in one religion or another...Religiosity as human behavior, in all its forms, both phenomenologically and practically, is in essence a social product, whose origin is in an objective social-material reality defined by the economic, political, social, and cultural contexts of the given reality at a given historical stage. In this sense, religiosity is tightly connected to this reality and plays specific and diverse roles that are often contrasting....

Our initiative points to the need to change the dominant religious system formulated over the early centuries of Islam—the guardian system—by launching serious and courageous debate and placing daring demands with regard to the relations between religion and politics and society in general. We call for a new religious discourse and for a critique of the prevailing religious thought, especially among official religious institutions, as a prelude to a critique of religion itself and of existing religious practices at all levels. We call for the establishment of a scientific discipline of critique of religion, with its own subjects, methodologies, and foundations. I believe that initial steps have already been taken and serious attempts have been made in this direction, and these may be supplemented....

Third...the formation of secularism requires absolute neutrality on the part of the state in relation to religion and the abolition of the official religion of the state, as the state is a non-religious legal entity. The state’s declaration in its constitution that it adopts Islam [as an official religion]—as expressed in the statement: “Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic is its official language. The principles of Islamic shari’a are the principle source of legislation” (in the second clause of the 2014 constitution that was amended in 2019)—implies fervent support by the state for this religion over the other religions practiced by some of its citizens. On the other hand, the state’s commitment to neutrality toward all the religions practiced on its soil means first of all that it is a secular and
tolerant state that does not prefer one religion over another, but recognizes all religions equally, and guarantees adherents of these various religions the best possible conditions in order to conduct their religious rites and ceremonies. Neutrality on the part of the state will make it a state of all its citizens, regardless of their religion and intellectual leaning. As a result, all these citizens will enjoy legal equality and all rights to fill political and bureaucratic positions in the various mechanisms and institutions of the state, according to their abilities and skills. The modern secular state is a nation state with its political, social, and cultural implications, as it differentiates between the believer and the citizen. In its perception, the believer is a person who belongs to a particular religious denomination, but whose religious affiliation does not provide him with or deny him civil rights. Every citizen, male or female, is entitled to civil rights, without any connection to his/her religious affiliation.

In this context, our initiative raises the need to draft and formulate a new constitution in place of the 2014 constitution, in order to completely repeal the legacy [of previous constitutions and amendments ratified under the rule] of Sadat, Mubarak, and the Muslim Brotherhood, as these constitutions all emphasize the Islamic fundamentalist character of the state and the authority of religious institutions to interfere in the social order, and establish the factional and ethnic character of society and the state. I believe that the 2014 constitution was drafted in extraordinary and tense social and political circumstances, and that now, Egypt as a society and as a state is on a path to rehabilitation and recovery. Thus, the existing constitution, and its amendments, is not a constitution that represents the 2011 and 2013 revolutions in any way, or even the “civil state,” but is merely a recycled version of the constitutions I mentioned previously. The new, modern, and developing Egypt requires a new constitution that paves the way for complete secularization of the state and society. The new constitution will be a new social and political contract between society and the state and will ensure an overall system of rights and citizenship anchored in international charters of human rights that Egypt has officially adopted and embraced in all legal and constitutional frameworks. This constitution will define a modern system of civil duties and will completely release society from the authority of the clerics and religious institutions, and from their involvement and hegemony in society and the state. The sources of authority in the new constitution shall be [human] reason, science, law, international charters of human rights, and the [desire] to protect the supreme interests of the state. I call for the establishment of a national committee on the basis on a national consensus that will seek the opinion of all Egyptians and formulate a new constitution that will be presented for public debate (for three years at the most) prior to ratification. A secular Egypt means that religion is not the source of authority of laws and legislations, but rather reason, science, the supreme national interest, and the free will of the people.

Fourth, Egyptian creativity and innovation must be freed from all barriers and cultural prohibitions supposedly based on religion, and human creation must be judged according to objective criteria. Even though the Islamic fundamentalists prohibit others from being involved in affairs of religion, including history and doctrines connected to religion, they themselves are involved, often in a very vocal manner, in making accusations of heresy and the abandonment of religion, in areas that have no connection to religion, such as societal, political, philosophical, scientific, literary, and artistic affairs. They insist that religion must be the binding source of authority in all areas of human activity. Only they hold a monopoly on the authority to judge the many shades of human creation, according to solely religious criteria. It should be noted here that in the view of the state, the official religious institutions—al-Azhar and the Church—
and other fundamentalist groups that have penetrated state institutions, have the full right to express their opinion and even to have the last word on matters of philosophy, science, literature, and art. Moreover, the state and its institutions are always willing to request the opinion of these elements and to give way to their council and limit the thought of Egyptians by placing prohibitions on the dissemination of certain books, ideas, works of art, and literature, and by censorship.

Fifth, the sources of fanaticism should be desiccated and the values of citizenship should be purified of this fanaticism, so that already in the early years of education [Egyptians] will acquire a deep awareness of their Egyptian identity and not an identity associated with a particular religion. There are Islamic religious curricula taught at the various stages of public education, which often sanctify factionalism and sectarianism, accuse adherents of other religions of perverting religion and heresy, emphasizing that Islam alone is the true faith, and that God accepts only those who believe in Islam. There are also schools that educate Muslims from a young age to hate Christians, their brothers in the motherland, only because of a religious difference, and thus they plant within them an intentional separatism from adherents of other faiths in the motherland. We call for a change in these curricula to a program based on human morality and general Egyptian history. These curricula have the potential to reconstruct the historical memory of Egyptians, infusing in them a new spirit that supports the secularization of the state and society as a general national project, and to create a national fabric of belonging to an open and progressive Egyptian identity that is above religious and traditional affiliations and identities. In this way, Egyptians will understand from a young age that they are the children of one nation and equal partners in the building of the motherland and its advancement.

Conclusion

In the circumstances of a local, regional, and international campaign against political Islam that has been underway since the 2013 overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt, the Institution of Egyptians seeks to establish a secular alternative on its ruins. Out of recognition that the Egyptian secular stream lacks deep foundations in Egyptian society, members of the movement promote a conscious rebellion against the religious status of the country and the dominance of religious thought over various areas of life, from the constitution and politics to education, culture, and art. However in a state like Egypt, which Asef Bayat (Bayat, 2013, p.186) typifies as a “religiosecular” state, the call to establish a secular state is not popular and even sparks resentment. In its place, a more prevalent call is for a civil state, which embodies within it the desire to adopt modern norms, institutions, and forms of government, within the boundaries of religion.

The more the concept of a civil state spreads in the Arab world, the more it sheds its original secular meaning and takes on the meaning of a state where the dominance of Islam does not indicate backwardness and does not impede progress.
wish to restore the past, such as the IS model, or to impose the rule of clerics, as in the Iranian model. Alongside this, the adoption of the idea of a civil state also means the rejection of the secular state model and opposition to the controversial assumption that modernization by necessity requires secularization.

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Legislative committee of representatives confirms the responsibility of the Armed Forces to maintain the

Notes
1 Translated from Arabic into Hebrew by Yehudit Harel; Hebrew translation edited by Limor Lavie.
Public Opinion

The Arab Spring Then and Now, through the Prism of Public Opinion

David Pollock

Mass popular discontent inspired the Arab Spring a decade ago, but its violent failures leave a very different legacy today. Surveys show that many Arabs now prioritize stability and economic sustenance over politics, revolution, or even religion. Most accept coexistence with Israel, and even more despise Iran and its sectarian allies, who have turned the Arab Spring into civil wars. Among Arab states, many leaders are highly attuned to public opinion and invest in attaining credible data for use as a tool in policy formulation. In the US, specific episodes show how adequate attention to this factor helped formulate sound Mideast policies, but inadequate attention contributed to tragic failures, even 9/11. With the signing of the Abraham Accords and a new administration in Washington, an understanding of the ranges and nuances of Arab public opinion in different countries can help contribute to informed foreign policy analysis and policy deliberations, both in Israel and the United States.

Keywords: public opinion, Arab world, Arab Spring, Israel, United States
The eruption of the Arab Spring a decade ago caught most of the world—including the Arabs themselves—almost totally by surprise. But once it happened, everyone began to pay new attention to the underlying but long-neglected issue of Arab public opinion—yet once more, as this was not the first time that an eruption on the “Arab street” caught the world off guard.

Empirical survey data from polls in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 commissioned by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and supervised by me—including responses from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan—provide some support for this hypothesis. First, the large majority of poll respondents in a survey from June 2020 say their top priorities are practical personal matters, such as family, income, health, jobs, and education, rather than political or even religious issues. Second, polls from November 2019 and June 2020 suggest the majority (or at least plurality) in many countries polled, even in countries like Egypt where poverty, corruption, and repression are widely perceived as serious problems, agree with the proposition, “When I think about what’s going on in places like Syria or Yemen, I feel that our own situation here is actually not so bad.” Fewer than half in each country polled think the current protests in Iraq or Lebanon will yield positive change; and at least half in each country say it’s a “good thing” that “we are not having such large protest demonstrations here.”

These sentiments are largely echoed by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, which also helps account for the startling calm there, even as the peace process has been totally frozen since 2014. (A detailed documentation of this and other key related issues can be found in A Nation Divided: Palestinian Views on War and Peace with Israel, of June 2020.) Instead of guessing why no third intifada is underway or on the horizon, I decided to “crowdsource” the answer and pose that question to the Palestinians themselves. In surveys conducted in the West Bank and Gaza in mid-2019 and again in early 2020, the responses were clear. Only a small minority said this was because they still retained some hope of a peaceful, diplomatic
solution to their plight. Rather, most said their quiescence reflects a combination of other, grimmer motives: they generally prioritized their everyday practical needs over politics; they feared chaos, violence, and repression—both by Israel and by the two Palestinian governments—to no likely benefit; and they do not trust their own leaders to manage a confrontation with Israel.

In other words, a decade after the largest Arab uprisings of recent times, many Arabs now prefer stability over disruption. In this sense, the primary legacy of the Arab Spring may not be its apparent or temporary successes in a few places, but its most miserable, enduring failures: in Syria or Yemen or Libya. The “reverse demonstration effect” of those conflicts now counters the earlier demonstration impact that the initial Tunisian uprising had on so many other Arab states during the first wave of the Arab Spring.

And yet the sustained popular uprisings in Sudan and Algeria in the past two years suggest that this sweeping generalization, like most others, also has some exceptions that prove the rule. Did the polls predict that too? Unfortunately, no, because the Algerian and Sudanese governments allowed almost no serious political polling, by either internal or external experts. As I noted in 1993, “Where you can’t measure public opinion, it doesn’t matter very much—until the revolution!”

**After the Arab Spring: How Arab Regimes Deal with Public Opinion**

There is a second rough, long-term cyclical pattern to Arab uprisings, categorized by type of regime. In the 1950s and 1960s, a series of hereditary Arab monarchies and theocracies were toppled by violent insurrections: Egypt in 1952, Iraq in 1958, Yemen in 1962, and Libya in 1969 (though the latter was a military coup, not a popular revolution). Since then, however, the monarchies have fared better in this respect than the other types of autocratic Arab regimes, or even the quasi-democratic ones, like Lebanon or post-Saddam Iraq. It is too often overlooked that the Arab Spring, in its different versions over the past decade, touched the six Arab kingdoms of the Gulf, Jordan, and Morocco only very lightly.

Why? At first glance, some say the obvious answer is money; the oil-rich Gulf governments can simply buy off opposition as needed. There is some validity to this observation. In 2011, for example, the Saudi government, concerned about the spreading civil unrest in its neighborhood, abruptly announced a $100 billion gift to its citizens. Included in that package was the government’s creation of 60,000 new jobs—every single one of them in the Interior Ministry, charged with surveillance and suppression of dissent.

At a second glance, though, this cannot be the whole story, because the oil-poor kingdoms of Jordan and Morocco have also exhibited a goodly measure of immunity to the mass spread of any “anti-crown” virus. Thus other factors must also play a role, including the King’s degree of religious legitimacy; his image of being above the political fray and his appeal for stability; his adeptness at finding scapegoats; his ability to offer promising future prospects by shuffling parties and prime ministers; and his successful appeals to nationalism. Also at work is aid from fellow Arab monarchs abroad, whether financial and/or military, as most vividly displayed by the Saudi intervention to protect the King of Bahrain early in the Arab Spring.

And at third glance, it appears that public opinion plays a significant role here as well. Contrary to common misconception, most contemporary Arab kings do care about what the public thinks and take care to understand and even cater to it, at least to some extent. Put simply, they realize their thrones may be at risk. Thus, the King of Jordan, to cite the most clear-cut case, has long employed a royal pollster (surely an oxymoron historically) to good effect, to design electoral districts, promotional campaigns, and even some policy options.
Moreover, in recent years, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman has assiduously followed this very model of a modern monarch. There exists clear (though little-known) evidence that the Saudi government is increasingly aware of, interested in, and at least to some extent receptive to its own public’s views. One sign is the activity of the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, a Riyadh-based institute for assessing popular attitudes and promoting intra-Saudi discourse. The institute was founded fifteen years ago, but significantly increased its productivity after MBS was named crown prince in 2016.

A central goal of the Center is to keep a finger on the pulse of public opinion for systematic input on official policies—not just outreach to promote those policies after the fact. This, one of its top managers readily acknowledged in July 2018, is an unfamiliar and challenging concept in Saudi Arabia, but is currently taken quite seriously at the highest levels of government. Around the time of MBS’s ascent, the Center established a division dedicated to conducting opinion polls. When I visited the Center in mid-2018, it had already fielded over 100 polls, surveying a total of around 33,000 Saudis. According to experts there, the Center’s findings and insights enabled it to provide the government with more than 100 specific policy recommendations over the preceding two years, 65 of which were accepted and implemented. One striking case is popular support for the long-awaited decision in 2018 to allow Saudi women to drive. Other initiatives reflect the gamut of social and economic issues, including the selective but very public crackdown on corruption.

In my polls in Saudi Arabia, Saudis have been willing to voice mixed views even on some especially sensitive issues. For example, asked in late 2017 if Islam “should be interpreted in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern direction,” just 30 percent said yes—though that was double the figure from late 2015. But on foreign policy issues, my polls confirm that Saudi official policies are largely in tune with the public. Fear and loathing of Iran and its regional proxies, from the Houthis to Hezbollah, is nearly universal not just among the Saudi elite, but on the Saudi street as well.

Much the same is true, albeit with smaller majorities, for other seemingly provocative moves: the feud with Qatar, the close alliance with the United States, and even the conditional support for a settlement with Israel. In 2018, the Saudi head of the Muslim World League, for example, made the astonishing proposal to march for peace to Jerusalem along with Jewish and Christian clerics. This is possible given tacit support from around two-thirds of the Saudi public, who say that peace with Israel is desirable as long as Palestinian rights are also respected.

On the basis of these polls and discussions inside Saudi Arabia, I was able to publish this prediction in October 2018, just a week after the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi:

Awful as this episode appears to be, its broader significance is a separate question. And while such incidents understandably damage Saudi Arabia’s image among some Western governments, analysts, journalists, and investors, they are of remarkably little interest to most people inside the country. As a result, contrary to conventional wisdom, they do not seriously threaten the kingdom’s government—at least not with the specter of mass protest, or of organized dissidence by major segments of the society such as the business, clerical, professional, or military establishments.…
the crackdown on free speech, appear very different inside and outside the kingdom. Some outsiders may well question particular Saudi government choices. They should not, however, confuse their own judgments with dire, unfounded predictions about Saudi instability. Inside the kingdom, issues that loom large abroad are outweighed by the Saudi government’s overall attentiveness to the pulse of its people.

Today, two years later, this contrarian prediction stands the test of time—not a very long time, to be sure, but in today’s Middle East, perhaps a respectable amount. And if it is indeed respectable, that is because it was based on actual evidence about public opinion.

The Arab Spring’s Public Opinion Legacy for Israel

There is an additional, powerful, yet little understood legacy of the Arab Spring, also related to public opinion. To a significant extent, the conviction of Arab nations that Israel poses the most serious threat in the Middle East has changed. Rather, most now recognize the more significant threat that Iran and its proxies or allies represent for the region. And as a result, they are more ready to make peace with Israel. This shift in public opinion is one of the drivers behind recent seemingly surprising departures in government policies and regional dynamics. The occasional poll suggesting that many Arab publics still view Israel as a major threat is misleading. As Professor Michael Robbins, director of the Arab Barometer, explained recently in an October 2020 webinar hosted by Singapore’s Middle East Institute: if—but only if—the question of Israel is prompted by the pollster, many respondents agree it remains a threat; otherwise, respondents hardly mention Israel spontaneously when asked broadly about threats or challenges to their country or the region. Other polls purporting to show contrary results, such as the Qatari Arab Center's polls, are deeply flawed methodologically and thus biased beyond repair.

Most important, though often misunderstood, is that this is true today not only at the elite governing level, but also at the popular one. Poll after poll proves that at least since 2014, large majorities in many Arab societies strongly disapprove of Tehran’s policies and of Khamenei personally; attach very little importance to good relations with Iran; and overwhelmingly dislike Hezbollah, the Assad regime, and the Houthis. This is true even in the Shiite-majority Arab states of Iraq and Bahrain. The striking exception is Lebanon, which is acutely polarized on these issues by sect: the Shiites are still pro-Iran and pro-Hezbollah, although somewhat less so in the past two years, as Washington Institute polling from November 2019 and November 2020 demonstrate; the Sunnis are almost uniformly opposed to both; and the Christians are caught in the middle, but leaning most recently toward the Sunni pole, according to these same data sets.

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What does all of this have to do with the Arab Spring? Here again, the timing and context lead one to judge that what tipped the scales was the Syrian civil war. Before that, most Arabs were convinced that the main threat to the region was Israel. But now, the region’s peoples have woken up to the fact that the Iran-backed Assad regime, whose legitimacy was based partly upon “resisting” Israel, turned its entire military arsenal, with help from Iran and Hezbollah, toward repressing its own citizens.

In the wake of its war with Israel in 2006, Hezbollah’s popularity in the region was
indisputable. Its approval ratings in various surveys were tremendously high, and there were demonstrations and public displays of support for Hezbollah on nearly every Arab street. Five years later, Hezbollah became involved in military operations in Syria in support of Bashar al-Assad. On the popular level, Hezbollah revealed its true, sectarian, pro-Iranian face and slaughtered thousands of civilians in Syria, after having once been primarily seen as a party supporting the Palestinians against Israel. All of this coincided with the deployment of other Iranian militias that wreaked havoc in Iraq and Yemen, leading many ordinary Arabs to discover a different “truth” about their real enemies.

Today, the majority of Arab peoples accept in principle the concept of peace with Israel and a two-state solution to resolve the Palestinian issue. Furthermore, most credible polls show that majorities also accept the idea of some Arab governments maintaining different kinds of relations with Israel right now—even without a final agreement on the Palestinian issue. However, according to the results of the Washington Institute’s November 2020 poll, the majority of Arab publics are still wary of very cozy personal relations with Israel. This is clearly the case, to take a striking example, with the public in Egypt, which officially has been at peace with Israel for over forty years. Yet anecdotal and media accounts suggest that most Egyptians still dislike Israel, and surveys, including the most recent polling concluded in November 2020, confirm that most do not favor much personal contact with the Jewish state. Nevertheless, poll after poll also confirms that the solid majority of Egyptians continue to support a two-state solution, implying peace with Israel. They also agree, based on November 2018 polling, that “Arab states should offer both the Israelis and the Palestinians incentives to moderate their positions.”

Remarkably, there has not been a single large-scale protest demonstration in Arab streets against Israel’s recent peace agreements with the UAE and Bahrain. This is completely different from the situation in the region just a few years ago. During the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, or even more recently during the campaigns between Hamas and Israel in Gaza in 2009 and 2014, there were major demonstrations calling for death to Israel. Another such war, or intifada, could conceivably return the region to its old ways.

But the Arab Spring, and particularly its Syrian debacle, has fundamentally changed the calculus of Arab popular threat perceptions. As one Syrian opposition fighter told me in July 2012: “I used to be fanatically anti-Israel, like most of my friends. But we have just learned the hard way that Israel is actually more merciful (arham) than my own government.” In Sudan, we now witness the remarkable spectacle of an “Arab Spring-like” popular revolution, notwithstanding some deep internal divisions, actually promoting not enmity but rapprochement with Israel—an almost unthinkable prospect for the past several generations.

The US Government and Arab Public Opinion, from Bush I to Biden: Two Success Stories

Given the importance of the nexus between Arab public opinion and the Arab Spring, and how much Arab governments take it into account, one wonders how that connection is understood and acted upon by key outside powers as well. Over the past 30 years, the US government has at times paid very close attention to Arab and broader Muslim world public opinion—but at other times ignored it. What accounts for the dramatic ups and downs of expert or official interest in Arab popular attitudes? That question is easy to answer, in much the same cyclical vein as the earlier question about the Arab Spring itself. Experts and officials, like most people, naturally and usually pay close attention to some critical phenomenon or trend only after, not before, it emerges as a crisis. Then they soon enough forget about it, once the crisis seems to ease.
Some very striking examples of both kinds of response are worth noting. In the former category, when US officials heeded Arab opinion polls, the first and probably most significant episode occurred in advance of the 1991 Gulf War (Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm), after Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait in August 1990. Millions of Arabs in Amman, Tunis, Casablanca, and elsewhere in the region marched in the streets in support of Saddam Hussein, so in deciding how to react, the George H. W. Bush administration was quite concerned about the potential for political upheaval there.

The result was the launch of the first solid public opinion polls in many Arab countries, at first just tacking on a few political questions to an otherwise innocuous questionnaire for a commercial market research survey about brands of cigarettes, or even shampoo. These surveys revealed that completely contrary to the conventional wisdom at the time, Saddam was hardly a pan-Arab hero. True, he was widely admired in a few Arab societies, like Jordan or Tunisia; but he was widely reviled in others, including—crucially—the Arab Gulf states, Egypt, and Syria; and he was the object of very mixed views in still other Arab states, such as Morocco.

These significant data sets quickly made their way, on a weekly basis starting in September 1990, all the way up to President Bush and his most senior advisors. They helped determine whether and where the US would work to enlist Arab governments’ political and military support against Saddam, without undermining their own internal stability. And because of their counterintuitive success in predicting and guiding actual political outcomes, polling became one of the tools privately trusted both by the US and by some Arab governments to gauge the mood, and the policy implications, of the proverbial “Arab street.”

Two decades later, after many years of calm before the storm of the Arab Spring, interest in Arab opinion polls dwindled in many quarters. To make matters worse, fewer such polls were available at all, as Arab governments cracked down increasingly on free expression. That indeed helps to explain why the uprisings caught so many off-guard.

Then, when mass protests surged in one Arab country after another in early 2011, interest in surveys picked up. To cite one example: an unpublished Egyptian survey I conducted in early 2011, in the very midst of the January/February 2011 revolution there, showed that most Egyptians did not initially view it in primarily “Islamic” terms. This privately attracted some high-level US government attention, and may have helped tip the balance toward acceptance of Mubarak’s overthrow. Shortly afterward, surveys that accurately predicted that two Islamic parties (the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist al-Nur party) would win a solid majority in the new, post-revolutionary Egyptian parliament may have helped tip the balance toward American acceptance of the accession of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi as president of Egypt following the very close 2012 election. Given the nature of Egyptian public opinion, the alternative might well have been major instability and/or very violent repression in this key Arab ally of the United States. But just one year later, as evidence mounted that much of the Egyptian public was already fed up with the Morsi regime, Washington again shifted course. Despite some misgivings and verbal regrets, it accepted General Sisi’s overthrow of Egypt’s elected leader. The US, with a nod to the Egyptian street, even refused to label the event a military coup, speaking instead of a regime change “with popular support.”

The larger point, however, is that the initiative in each of these rapid political twists and turns lay with the Egyptian public, not with Washington. This, of course, runs counter to the conspiracy theories that claimed it was the US that either supported the Muslim Brotherhood or opposed it. Surveys measuring Egyptian public opinion played a role, if only a secondary one, in American policy calculations. But more important, American policy played
only a secondary role in all of these dramatic Egyptian developments.

Syria provides another dramatic, early instance of public opinion surveys as a factor—or in this case a missing link—in US policy toward the original Arab Spring. This case is discussed in more detail below, but suffice it to say here that as in the Egyptian case, actual surveys in 2011-2013 showed that the mass uprising against Assad’s regime was not primarily an “Islamic” one. This suggested to some that the US had a genuine opportunity to help replace a hostile regime by seriously supporting the relatively moderate Syrian opposition. In the end, the Obama administration decided to pay less heed to the Syrian public, and more to its own concerns about not getting dragged into a civil war, or into a clash with Iran, with which it was secretly negotiating a nuclear deal.

Fast forward to today, and to the transition from the Trump to the Biden administration in Washington. On Arab-Israeli peacemaking policy, some senior Trump officials made practical use of Arab public opinion data in pursuing their sharply revised approach. That shift included a much greater emphasis on economic issues and on other Arabs, rather than on the Palestinians. In that context, these American officials noted that popular attitudes toward Israel had softened in the Arab Gulf states, even as Palestinian attitudes had hardened. They took into account survey findings showing that most Arabs overall, in this case including the Palestinians themselves, were more concerned about economic than about political problems. And they were intrigued by responses to this bellwether question, asked in the Washington Institute surveys over the past several years across six key Arab societies: “Should Arab governments offer incentives, both to Israel and to the Palestinians, in order to encourage them to moderate their positions?” In every Arab country polled in 2017, 2018, and 2019 the solid majority (averaging around two-thirds) of the public consistently answered in the affirmative, with the exception of Lebanon in 2019, where slightly less than half were in favor.

In the end, offering such incentives to Israel was exactly what the UAE and Bahrain did in August-September 2020: they “normalized” diplomatic and commercial relations with Israel, in exchange for its commitment to freeze West Bank annexation. And they knew from public opinion polls, as did the American officials who encouraged them, that this seemingly radical step would largely be accepted by their own populations. While that was certainly not the sole factor in these policy calculations, it was clearly one of the contributing causes for these historic normalization agreements.

How much (or little) attention the Biden team will pay to this new equation is naturally unknowable at this point. Nevertheless, if recent past experience, plus their own previous interest in opinion polls, is any guide, members of the new administration will presumably once again give some consideration to regional popular opinion as they formulate and execute Mideast policies. In the Arab-Israeli arena, the paradox they will confront is this: polls show that both the Palestinian and Israeli publics have soured on the two-state solution, even as other Arab publics have increasingly come around to supporting it. This underlying transformation may well argue against dramatic departures from current policy, despite the typical temptation of each new president to distinguish himself from his predecessor.

The US Government’s Take on Regional Public Opinion: Two Tragic Failures

In sharp contrast to these two success stories, however, there have also been several significant episodes when the US government chose to ignore Arab or broader Muslim public opinion polls—at its own peril. The most egregious example, in which I was directly involved, took place in advance of 9/11. A year earlier, while in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department, I organized, supervised,
and analyzed a series of surveys, published in unclassified form as a monograph entitled, “The Muslim Majority: New Views from Beyond the Middle East.”

The analysis pointed out that in Pakistan, alone among major Muslim countries, a plurality actually favored jihadi terrorism against American civilian targets. Based on that data, plus background knowledge of Pakistan’s close ties with the Taliban in Afghanistan and their al-Qaeda protégés, I predicted a clear and present danger of a major terrorist attack in the homeland, and publicly raised that prospect with a senior official in the incoming George W. Bush administration.

When I reentered the Secretary of State’s Policy Planning Staff in May 2001, four months before 9/11, I immediately penned a five-page memorandum addressed directly to the Secretary. Its opening sentence, quoted in my unclassified official performance review for that year, was, “The U.S. can no longer live with Taliban support for terrorism.” The memorandum went on to prescribe that the US urgently deliver this ultimatum to both Pakistan and the Taliban: hand over bin Laden and his entourage to us within 30 days, or we will go in and get them ourselves. Unfortunately, this advice, based partly on exclusive public opinion data, was ignored. Much later, after the events of 9/11, it was officially recognized as “stunningly prescient” but, of course, that was too late to prevent this terrible tragedy.

A second and more recent case in point, albeit a more ambiguous one, concerns US policy toward the Syrian opposition at the height of the civil war there, in 2012-13. One of the arguments made in Washington against serious support for that opposition was its allegedly predominantly Islamist or even jihadi composition. In fact, however, several credible private surveys of the Syrian opposition at the time, both in exile and inside the country, demonstrated that at that early stage it was still more liberal, secular, and democratic, rather than Islamist or jihadi. Those findings were quickly relayed to relevant US officials, with the gist even published in three major American daily newspapers. Yet this relatively encouraging conclusion was either ignored or overridden at the most senior US government levels.

Why did that happen in this particular instance? To be sure, such public opinion and survey data, even about a key Arab Spring development in progress, is never the only, and rarely the decisive, factor in government policy decisions. There were indeed other claims made to justify US reluctance to become more deeply entangled with the Syrian opposition. Prominent among them were the arguments that this could prove too protracted, demanding, or destabilizing a mission, and more confidentially, that it could jeopardize the concurrent secret US diplomatic outreach to Iran. Nevertheless, given the surprisingly positive survey results noted above, the choice to dismiss them was arguably another significant missed opportunity for a different and possibly more effective US policy.

Conclusion

The preceding “survey of surveys” leads to a few basic conclusions. First, from an intelligence and policy point of view, Arab public opinion is measurable, and it matters. It is certainly not a perfect guide, neither to prediction, nor to policy deliberation. But polls can clearly help clarify the nature of brewing political storms—and, just as important, the areas of likely continued calm, as in the Arab Gulf states. They can help identify both policy opportunities, as in the case of Arab-Israeli normalization, and pitfalls, as in the case of neglecting the tragically high level of popular support for jihadi terrorism in the years just before and just after 9/11.

More specifically, we need to know which Arab governments are paying more attention to their own public’s opinion, and which ones are paying less attention to it, perhaps at their own peril. And we need to know how much and what kind of attention other powers, inside and outside the region, are paying to this factor as they formulate and execute their policies.
Such considerations would advance our understanding of where and when the next Arab Spring (or Palestinian intifada) is more or less likely to occur. Equally useful, public opinion polls can aid in deciding how best to try and promote, preempt, or if need be, respond to such developments.

Second, looking back at the Arab Spring’s first decade, polls show that Arabs themselves have decidedly mixed views. There is surprisingly little explicit introspection about it in the available survey data, which in itself suggests a high degree of uncertainty or ambivalence. But we know that today, about half of most Arab publics polled still express some sympathy for mass popular protests, particularly about corruption. Whether that is a glass half full, or half empty, is yet another judgment call.

Third, looking ahead, what do the polls suggest about the coming decade? Despite the disillusionment, there are some grounds for cautious optimism. The trajectory of Arab public opinion is increasingly toward what could reasonably be called moderation: to reject religious extremism, to oppose Iran’s hegemonic ambitions and proxies, to accept some kinds of normalization with Israel, and to look for pragmatic steps forward rather than sweeping ideological movements in most areas of public life.

All this is particularly true of the rising younger, under-30 half of the overall Arab adult population. That is naturally where most futurists are focused. But even more significantly, surveys demonstrate that even the older generation, which still controls the discourse and the decision making in many of these countries, is not far behind their children in terms of this attitudinal trend over time.

That is not to affirm unequivocally, however, that reason and moderation will prevail. To be sure, some Arab regimes and elites remain brutally unresponsive to public opinion, and/or hopelessly and violently internally divided. Other repressive Arab regimes are arguably restraining their own militant publics, yet for that very reason are at some risk of major internal upheaval, or even overthrow. Dire economic and demographic projections for the region as a whole, including the formerly oil-rich countries, likewise lead to a certain degree of apprehension about their medium-term futures.

The role of public opinion polls over the next decade, then, should be to track where and when the divergence between rulers and ruled is narrowing, and where and when it is widening to the point of possible traumatic injury to both.
injury to both. It should also be to locate those concrete issues on which rulers may have more or less margin for maneuver than they (or we) commonly believe, and to use that knowledge to suggest a menu of positive policy adjustments. Armed with this acquired wisdom, one can then factor in public opinion, along with all the other elements at play, into a sensible and constructive assessment of the prospects for the next season of Arab politics.

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Some 100 million people live in the Middle East in countries that have been affected by civil wars or are failed states. One of the results has been high unemployment, especially among the young, a phenomenon that has severe economic, social, and political consequences in oil-rich states, as well as in the much poorer states with little or no oil. This article examines economic and demographic developments in the Arab world between the beginning of the Arab Spring in early 2010 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and reviews the causes and consequences of the conflicts that began in the Arab Spring.

Keywords: economic development, oil, demography, war, displacement, political power

This paper examines economic developments in the Arab world between the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring in 2010 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. During those years, the Arab world experienced a series of dramatic developments that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands and huge economic losses.

The Arab Spring began in Tunisia at the end of 2010, and resulted in the downfall of the
 Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan leaderships. Civil wars erupted in Syria and Libya, and the conflict in Yemen deepened. Early in 2014, the organization that became known as the Islamic State drove Iraqi government forces out of key cities, captured Mosul, and massacred thousands of Yazidis in Sinjar. At its height the Islamic State controlled 30 percent of Syria and 40 percent of Iraq. Conflict continued in Darfur throughout most of the decade, although tensions in Sudan eased with the removal of Omar al-Bashir as President in 2019. The massive explosion in August 2020 at the Beirut port deepened Lebanon’s economic and humanitarian crisis.

Between 2011 and 2020, up to 1.3 million people were killed as a result of conflicts in the region, including an estimated 585,000 in Syria, 93,000 in Iraq, over 200,000 in Yemen, 380,000 in Sudan and South Sudan, and 50,000-100,000 in Libya (Iraq Body Count, 2020; Specia, 2018; Beaumont, 2019).

Political unrest brought economic growth to a standstill, and wars resulted in huge losses. Despite this, the population grew (with the notable exception of Syria), with the net effect of a decline in income per capita, which increased poverty levels and public health risks. This was compounded by deteriorating environmental conditions, including water shortages.

Wars and economic conditions within the region and in surrounding areas, such as Afghanistan and the Sahel, have resulted in the movement of people into Arab countries and from there to Europe. This immigration was frequently illegal and has resulted in numerous deaths as well as major political problems for those countries receiving migrants and for those trying to prevent their entry. The region was affected by the international financial crisis of 2008-2009 and is now suffering as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Leading Up to the Arab Spring
The Arab Spring occurred as a result of increasing frustration among many sections of society, first in Tunisia and then in Egypt. In those countries, the rulers were toppled, though in Egypt military rule was restored in 2013. In Libya, Syria, and Yemen revolts against dictators resulted in civil wars that have continued over the past decade. In Bahrain, a revolt by the majority Shia population against its Sunni rulers in 2011 was put down by the government with Saudi military aid.

According to the World Bank, the Arab Spring uprisings were preceded by a decline in life satisfaction from what were already low happiness levels, despite economic and human development progress in the 1990s and early 2000s. This “unhappy development” paradox was accompanied by rising social discontent due to poor or deteriorating standards of living, labor market conditions, and crony capitalism. While objective conditions contributed to discontent, subjective awareness of shortcomings in these conditions played a major role. The increasing awareness of social ills was partly due to the modernization process in which society was no longer seen as a moral order ordained by God. In addition, an increasing number of educated people called for government based on democracy and meritocracy rather than autocratic rule (Arampatzi, Burger et al., 2015).

The countries that experienced Arab socialism in the 1960s created inclusive economies and exclusive political systems. While they generated large-scale public sector employment, they were ruled autocratically. The socialist experiment led to serious economic difficulties, and as a result financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank was necessary. In return for assistance, reforms under what subsequently became known as the Washington Consensus were imposed. Reductions in public spending and privatization were among the measures demanded, which resulted in the sale of public sector assets to those in the private sector who were close to the rulers. In this way crony capitalism developed and helped to fuel resentment among those excluded—
the vast majority of the population—of deals signed without public scrutiny (Diwan, Malik et al., 2019). The spread of education and the availability of social media increased dissatisfaction with the status quo.

These revolts, with the exception of that in Tunisia, were not based on strong coalitions. Those who opposed the regime were unorganized, and demonstrations developed spontaneously. Divisions in the Arab world were largely between religious and military forces, and the middle class has long been known for its weakness. Political parties were frail and failed to act as representatives of different sectors of the population. Millions of people in rural areas did not take part in the protests, as their immediate concerns were food, electricity, and safe water supplies. For them, democracy was a much lower priority (Avineri, 2012). The fact that power has been in the hands of the military, or monarchs supported by the military, has been at the root of the weak performance of most Arab countries since their independence. This distribution of power was not, however, their invention. The reliance of rulers on religious and military forces has been a feature of Middle East politics for hundreds of years and was adopted by those who came to power, including the Ottomans, European colonialists, and more recently, Arab rulers. The development of the middle class and the role of the intelligentsia were restricted, and the results were economic as well as political (Kuru, 2019). It is this political economy that is central in explaining how Arab economies have performed in the last decade.

Demographic Trends

In the decade since the start of the Arab Spring in late 2010, the population of the 22 member states of the Arab League has grown from 355 million to an estimated 436 million. While the rate of population growth has declined, absolute increases rose. In 2000-2009, the average annual rate of growth was 2.29 percent and the absolute increase was 64 million; in 2010-2019, the growth rate was 2.13 percent but the absolute rise was almost 74 million (Figure 1). These increases pose huge problems for social and political stability as well as food and water supplies. They also contribute to formidable environmental pressures.

Between 2010 and 2019, Egypt, one of the poorer countries in the region, accounted for almost 24 percent of the increase in the Arab population. In 2010, its population was 83 million and by 2019 it had exceeded 100 million. Egypt’s population is currently growing at 1.94 percent, a rate that adds nearly two million people to the population annually. In Saudi Arabia, between 2010 and 2019, the total population rose from 27.4 million to 34.3 million. The native Saudi population increased from 19 million to 24 million, an average annual increase of 2.9 percent.

The Arab population is very young. Despite a small decline in the percentage of young people in the total population, in 2010, there were 120 million people age 0 to 14 years, while in 2019, there were 140 million. This is the group that comes onto the labor market and requires jobs, but the ability of economies in the region to generate those jobs is limited. When a large proportion of the population is young (the so-called “youth bulge”) there is the potential for a demographic dividend. This means that there are more people at working age and fewer very young and elderly to support. When income
is unevenly divided and a number of young people cannot find employment, the youth bulge becomes a demographic bomb, because a large number of frustrated youth may become a potential source of social and political instability (Lin, 2012).

The increase in population over the last decade was mainly due to the sharp decline in the mortality rates, improved life expectancy, and the less-rapid decline in the fertility rates in the Arab region. Between 2010 and 2018, the infant mortality rate declined from 31.8 per 1000 live births to 26.5 per 1000 live births, life expectancy at birth increased from 70.35 years to 71.81 years, and fertility rates decreased from 3.47 to 3.23 births per woman.

Many Arab countries are experiencing large population movements from rural to urban areas. In 2010, 56.4 percent of the population lived in urban areas; by 2019 the share reached 59.2 percent. This meant that the urban population rose by 58 million, which is nearly 30 percent of the total population. The population of Cairo, the largest city in the Arab world and one of the largest in the world, rose from 17 million in 2010 to an estimated 21 million in 2020 (World Population Review, 2020). The growth of cities in the poorer Arab states resulted in the loss of agricultural land, more overcrowding among the poor, and a greater threat to social and political stability. It is therefore not surprising that the Arab Spring broke out in the cities and towns of the region.

**Economic Growth**

The Arab region includes both countries with among the highest GDP per capita levels in the world and countries with the lowest. In 2019, GDP per capita in the Arab region averaged $6,580 compared to the global average of $11,428. The range within the region is striking: Qatar had one of the highest GDP per capita levels in the world ($64,782) while Somalia had the lowest ($127).

Oil and natural gas have played a significant role in the divergence among states and in the structure of the respective economies. Oil revenues constituted 47 percent of government revenues in Yemen and 97 percent in Iraq, with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries ranging between those two figures. Sudan and Libya were also highly dependent on oil and/or gas in their economies. The share of oil rents to GDP in the Arab region is the highest in the world, with an average of 23 percent, compared to the global average of 2.6 percent in 2018, peaking at 41.3 percent in Kuwait, 43.4 percent in Libya, and 45.7 percent in Iraq.

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In oil-importing economies, the indirect effect of remittances created by oil rents reveal another aspect of oil and gas rents: in 2019 personal remittance inflows in Arab states were equal to 2.4 percent of GDP compared to a world average of 0.8 percent. Their volume had risen from $38 billion in 2010 to $59 billion in 2019, a much faster rise than in the previous decade. They are estimated to have fallen sharply in 2020.

Between 2010 and 2019, economic growth in the Arab countries averaged 2.8 percent a year, compared to 5 percent in the previous decade. GCC countries averaged 3.8 percent, while eleven other Arab countries averaged 1.7 percent. The latter include Libya, Syria, and Yemen, which all experienced years of negative growth because of war. In the period 2010-2017, income per capita in the GCC fell by an annual average of 0.1 percent; in the other 11 countries it fell by 0.8 percent. Projections for 2020 are given in the final section.

Figure 2 shows that between 2000 and 2010 the economies of the Arab region narrowed the gap with world income per capita. Since 2010...
that gap has widened as a result of their weak economic performance.

Figure 3 shows that economic growth decelerated between 2012 and 2019, barely kept up with that of the population. In 2020 it is projected to be negative as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

The slow growth rate has been the main factor behind high levels of unemployment. The other reason has been the pattern of growth:

**Figure 2. World and Arab GDP per capita, 2000-2020* ($ current prices and exchange rates)**

*2020 projection
Source: World Bank Data; IMF World Economic Outlook, October 2020; IMF Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia, October 2020; and author’s calculations

**Figure 3. Arab Countries: GDP and GDP/capita growth rates, 2010-2020***

*2020 projection
Source: World Bank Data; IMF World Economic Outlook, October 2020; IMF Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia, October 2020; and author’s calculations

growth has not occurred in sectors that generate employment because it has often been capital-intensive. This has been true in countries rich in labor and poor in capital such as Egypt, as well as countries rich in capital and less rich in labor (Diab, 2017).

Low and heavily subsidized fuel prices throughout the region have resulted in a bias toward investment in capital equipment, including vehicles, rather than in employment intensive sectors or technologies (International Monetary Fund, 2014). In 2019, Saudi Arabia spent almost $29 billion on energy subsidies, equal to 3.7 percent of its GDP; Egypt spent nearly $16 billion, or 5.2 percent. In Iraq, $7.4 billion or 3.3 percent went to energy subsidies (International Energy Agency, 2020).

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the fiscal position of Arab states was weak as a result of falling government revenues. Between 2008 and 2018, public revenues fell as economic growth declined in both the oil-rich and oil-poor countries of the region. The impact was short-lived as growth revived with the rise in oil prices in 2010. Since 2014, the negative effects of the oil price drop on growth and revenues have been longer lasting. During 2017 and 2018, following the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) decision on production cuts, there were some signs of improvement in oil prices, but the recovery was slow. The oil-poor middle income countries have continuously faced decline in economic growth since the global economic slowdown in 2008, followed by crisis in several parts of the region, including Tunisia, Syria, and Egypt. Other countries in the region were also adversely affected due to regional conflicts and population displacement and migration. The nominal growth of GDP declined from the peak in 2008 to a nadir in 2017. Economic growth in low-income countries fluctuated with an overall declining trend as well. Overall, the region has not been able to recover from the declining trend of 2008-2018. Consequently, it lost significant revenues, whether in the form
of oil revenues in the oil-rich countries, or tax revenues that would have been generated following the pre-2008 trends.

With low performance of growth and revenues, the gap between expenditure and revenues, as a share of GDP, has increased over time. The oil-rich countries had surpluses until 2014. Thereafter, they started running deficits as spending exceeded revenues. The middle-income countries had deficits that widened between 2008 and 2016. While they improved fiscal balances slightly during 2017 and 2018, deficits remained. The deficits in low-income countries also increased, resulting in increases in debt (UN Economic and Social Committee for West Asia, 2020a).

Arab economies include some of the largest public sectors in the world. The average share of public sector jobs in total employment in the 2000s was 25 percent in Egypt, 31 percent in Algeria, and 40 percent in Jordan. This compared to 15 percent in Turkey, 17 percent in Malaysia, and 29 percent in China. In the GCC countries, the public sector was the main employer of nationals, ranging from 72 percent in Saudi Arabia to 87 percent in Qatar. Indeed, public sector employment has been a central part of the social contract in the region, known as the “authoritarian bargain,” whereby authoritarian regimes provided public sector jobs and access to subsidized services and commodities in return for citizens’ political quiescence. In Egypt and Tunisia, these guaranteed and socially protected lifetime jobs went to those who achieved a minimum level of education; in Jordan, they went to members of Bedouin tribes and other groups critical to the political survival of the regime; and in others, including the GCC states, all nationals were eligible.

As a result of overstaffing and the lack of incentives for good performance, the expansion of public sector employment was at the expense of budgetary sustainability, administrative efficiency, and accountability (Monroe, 2020; Assaad & Barsoum, 2019).

Consider the case of Egypt, where employment in government and public sector enterprises in 2010 accounted for 26.1 percent of total employment. By 2018, as a result of changes in policy, this had fallen to 23.5 percent (Central Bank of Egypt, 2020). In 2017, the public sector in Egypt employed 5.9 million workers, or 22.5 percent of the workforce, excluding the armed forces. State-owned enterprises were prominent in such important sectors as infrastructure, construction, energy, mines, and transportation. For years these sectors have been starved for capital and talent and subject to neglect due to tight fiscal conditions. In addition, the weakness of market-based pricing in the public sector dampened investment while lack of incentives discouraged innovation and entrepreneurship. This has resulted in low productivity, a steady deterioration in structures and services, and higher costs of doing business. In 2016-17 the public sector accounted for 31 percent of GDP, which is large in comparison with Egypt’s peers.

Public sector employment has been a central part of the social contract in the region, known as the “authoritarian bargain,” whereby authoritarian regimes provided public sector jobs and access to subsidized services and commodities in return for citizens’ political quiescence.

Conventional analysis does not reveal the full extent of state dominance of the economy, largely due to the oversized role of the military in civilian activities. In Egypt, the armed forces—estimated at 440,000 (Global Fire Power, 2021)—own businesses that produce, inter alia, cement, steel, vehicles, fertilizers, and home appliances. They also own and manage service stations, hotels, toll roads, and travel facilities and services. Moreover, unlike their private sector counterparts they operate under a military-led regime, which accords them special status. They often benefit from cost advantages vis-à-vis the private sector. These included privileged access to land and credit, cheaper inputs of
energy, and reductions or even exemptions from some taxes and customs. They were also exempted from the standard requirements of transparency and civilian audit (Abed, Jin, & Markovic, 2019).

In Iraq, the government is the main employer. By 2018, the state was employing 2.89 million (13 percent of the working age population), and salaries accounted for 33 percent of total government spending. If state pensions and social support are added, then half of the government’s budget is spent on state employee wages and benefits (al-Mawlawi, 2018).

Table 1. The Competitive Industrial Performance Index, 2015-2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Global rank 2015</th>
<th>Global rank 2017</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>59</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>61</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>71</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>82</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>84</td>
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<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>95</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palestine</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>111</td>
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<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>116</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The main consequences of the dominance of the public sector were low competitiveness and slow economic growth. Table 1 shows how the competitive industrial performance index (CIP) changed between 2015 and 2017. This comprises three main variables: the capacity to produce and export manufactured goods, technological deepening and upgrading, and the country’s impact on the world economy. The table includes all the Arab states covered by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and three regional comparators out of a total of 150 countries surveyed. Most Arab countries have either a medium or low competitiveness ranking. Four of them rank among the lowest in the world. It is significant that Turkey and Israel score higher than all the Arab states listed, largely because they have large private sectors operating under competitive conditions. Iran has a large non-oil sector that is helping to maintain its economy during the period of oil sanctions.

The Labor Market, Unemployment, and Youth Unemployment

In the 2000s, the main challenge for governments in the region has been to absorb millions of young workers entering the workforce each year. In 2010, the population age 0 to 24 years in North Africa, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen was 171 million. In 2020 it is estimated at 192 million.

Arab labor markets are characterized by large public sectors, small, weak private sectors, and, depending on the country, large agricultural sectors and informal sectors outside agriculture. When the Arab Spring began in 2010, both youth unemployment and informal employment increased. Since then, rural to urban and cross-border migration has increased, leading to even greater unemployment and informal employment (Chen & Harvey, 2017).

The informal sector accounts for a large share of employment in the Arab world, ranging from 45 percent in Jordan to 63 percent in Egypt and 80 percent in Morocco (ILO, 2018). It is characterized by small or undefined work places, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, low levels of skills and productivity, low or irregular
incomes, long working hours, and lack of access to information, markets, finance, training, and technology. Workers in the informal economy are not recognized, registered, regulated, or protected under labor legislation, and do not benefit from social protection. Productivity is invariably low.

The Arab world has failed to create enough well-paid jobs in productive industries. There has been a bias toward capital-intensive investments even in the labor-rich (and capital-poor) countries. Coronavirus lockdowns have affected poor people working in the informal economy hardest, and they are the least likely to receive aid or healthcare from the government or heed calls to stay home (Holtmeier & Alami, 2020).

Slow economic growth and the sectoral pattern of growth have resulted in high rates of unemployment, especially for the young who are trying to enter the labor market. Table 2 shows that between 2010 and 2019, the overall unemployment rate increased by almost 1 percent. In 2010, unemployment was 1.2 percent higher than the world average and in 2019 it was 2.6 percent higher. When the age breakdown of the unemployed is examined, the figures are much worse. In 2010 unemployment among males aged 15-24 years was 4.4 percent higher than the world average and by 2019 it was 8.5 percent higher. Among females aged 15-24 years in 2010 it was 21.8 percent higher and by 2019 it was 24.7 percent higher (UNDP, 2020).

An examination of two very different economies, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, reveals that they both suffer from very high levels of youth unemployment. In Egypt, unemployment among 15-24-year-olds rose from 14.3 percent in 2010 to 17.1 percent in 2019, but declined among young females from 52.4 percent to 41 percent. In Saudi Arabia the young male unemployment rate declined from 23.1 percent to 20.2 percent while the rate among females rose from 52.6 percent to 60 percent, despite attempts to increase employment for women. While the government has tried to increase employment for Saudi citizens, demographic growth has swamped these effects. The very high rates pose threats to the welfare of the individuals concerned as well as to political stability.

Table 2. Unemployment in Arab states, 2010-2019 (percent of labor force)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Ages 15-24</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>26.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>25.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>26.9</td>
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<td>2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>26.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
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n.a. = not available
Source: World Bank Data, United Nations Development Programme

Unemployment data measure only the number of people who enter the labor market and do not find work. In addition many do not even enter the labor market, either for cultural reasons (a factor that applies more to women than to men) or because they are discouraged by high levels of unemployment, especially among youth. As a result, in 2019, the Arab labor force participation rate (the share of the working age population that seeks employment) was 48 percent, significantly lower than the global average of 60.7 percent. This was mainly due to the very low participation rate among women of 20.8 percent, down from a height of 21.4 percent in 2013. In 15 Arab countries, less than half the labor force is actively engaged in the labor market. This rate is the lowest in conflict-ridden countries such as Yemen (38 percent), the Palestinian territories (42 percent), and Syria (44 percent). The highest rates are in the GCC countries, where large numbers of
foreign workers are included. The labor force participation rates were 86.8 percent in Qatar and 82.1 percent in the United Arab Emirates. In recent years unemployment has increased in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

The problem of unemployment, especially among young people, affects the poorer republics and monarchies as well as the oil-rich states of the Gulf. It reflects the failure of development strategies that have emphasized investment in capital rather than labor, as well as restrictions on trade and crony capitalism.

Although youth unemployment is very high, only those who are supported by their families or the state can afford to stay unemployed. The most vulnerable groups are forced to accept low quality jobs in the informal economy or to become self-employed. Youth in Egypt and Jordan were severely disadvantaged with most ending up in vulnerable jobs such as self-employment, unpaid family workers, irregular wage workers, or the informal private sector. These jobs all share undesirable characteristics, including the lack of a contract, benefits such as health and social insurance, and paid leave. They also pay little, and young people who start out in a vulnerable job are unlikely to move to better-quality employment over time (al-Azzawi & Hlasny, 2018).

The problem of unemployment, especially among young people, affects the poorer republics and monarchies as well as the oil-rich states of the Gulf. It reflects the failure of development strategies that have emphasized investment in capital rather than labor, as well as restrictions on trade and crony capitalism (Cammett, Diwan, Richard, et al., 2018).

Climate Change, Water Supplies, and Food
The Arab states are located in the driest region in the world and boast one of the fastest population growth rates. In 2014 the volume of renewable internal fresh water resources per capita worldwide averaged 5,933 cubic meters, while in the Arab League countries it averaged 292 cubic meters. As a result of climate change, economic activity and demographic growth, the amount of water per capita has fallen sharply. Between 2007 and 2019, there was an estimated decline of 30 percent in Egypt, 41 percent in Iraq, 53 percent in Jordan, and 33 percent in the West Bank and Gaza.

The temperature in much of the Arab region is increasing and precipitation is decreasing, although some limited areas have experienced an increase in the intensity and volume of precipitation. One study suggests that by the end of this century certain population centers in the same region may experience temperature levels that humans cannot tolerate, owing to the consequences of increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases (World Bank, 2018).

According to the World Bank, the Middle East faces major economic threats from water scarcity exacerbated by climate change, and by 2050 this will cost between 6 and 14 percent of gross domestic product. In agriculture, over half the surface area of the Arab region’s major cropland systems are in the two highest vulnerability areas, with the Nile valley, the southwestern part of the Arabian Peninsula, the Tigris-Euphrates basin, and western parts of North Africa being the most vulnerable. The combined effects of changes in temperature, precipitation, and evapotranspiration will also threaten the food resource base for livestock, may induce the collapse of certain fish stocks, and could potentially reduce forest productivity. Changes in temperature also increase the risk of some water-related diseases (Pal & Eltahir, 2016; United Nations, 2020a).

The Food Crisis
The Arab world is among the regions most vulnerable to a food crisis. Given the lack of water resources, it relies on imports to cover over half its food needs. The response has often been to subsidize water and other inputs,
which has resulted in massive misallocations of resources. The problem is not production; rather, it is access to food that is the challenge. In 2019, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization noted that hunger had risen since 2011 due to conflict and protracted crisis. In 2020, over 42 million people in the region were chronically undernourished, of whom 34 million were in conflict-ridden countries. The worst afflicted countries in this respect are Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

In Yemen, 24 million people (80 percent of the population) rely on humanitarian assistance; 16 million suffer from acute food insecurity and need food aid; and 11 million are undernourished. Likewise, there are 11 million people in Iraq suffering from undernourishment, while in Syria, 9.3 million people—over half the population—suffer from food insecurity and need assistance. In Lebanon, as a result of the collapse of the economy, many have been impoverished and 700,000 people are suffering from undernourishment (Karasapan, 2020; Worldometer, 2020).

Oil
Between 2011 and 2016, oil production in the Arab members of OPEC (by far the largest producers among the Arab states) rose by 19 percent. From 2016 to 2019 it declined by 11 percent, and between 2019 and July 2020, by 14 percent. Prices fluctuated from a high of $109/barrel in 2012 to a low of $41/barrel in 2016. After a recovery in 2018-2019, there was another collapse in 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19 (Figure 4). As a result, revenues were very unstable, with a peak of $735 billion in 2012 and lows of about $430 billion in 2018 and 2019. The forecasts for 2020 suggest a decline of between 30 and 38 percent in 2020 as a result of the fall in demand due to the pandemic.

Oil revenues were affected by unstable prices (Figure 5). The US shale revolution of the last decade paved the way for the downturn and the rapid decline in world oil prices after mid-2014. Large swings in oil prices were also the result of instability, wars, political unrest, and civil conflicts in Libya, Iraq, and outside the region. Social and political unrest was a consequence of the steep rise of youth unemployment. GCC governments are no exception; they seek to create more productive private sector jobs for their citizens because creating high-paying and secure public sector jobs became fiscally unsustainable. There has been increasing pressure on all countries to reduce their use of fossil fuels in order to prevent exacerbation of global warming and avoid the worst effects of climate change. Oil-exporting MENA countries are increasingly concerned about the loss of oil revenues as a result of the move away from fossil fuels in the fight against global warming (Matallah, 2020).

The Arab World in the International Economy
Exports are not diversified in terms of products and markets, which increases the risk of negative
external shocks. Oil-exporting countries have a much higher product concentration than other Arab states with their focus on extractive and refining industries. Non-oil exporters also have very low product diversification compared to similar countries outside the region (International Trade Centre, 2020). Intra-regional trade among Arab states is low compared to other regions and most of it is in basic commodities and agricultural products. Intra-regional trade in high-technology goods is below the international average (International Trade Centre, 2015).

The share of Arab countries in world trade is very small, even if it has grown consistently. In 2005, their share in world exports was 4.8 percent, with the oil producers accounting for 4.1 percent. In 2010, it was 5.6 percent, with the oil producers accounting for 4.8 percent. In 2017 (the latest year for which there is data), the figures were 5.2 and 0.6 percent, respectively.

The very small and declining share of world exports of the non-oil producing countries in the region reflects the fact that they have very little to sell abroad.

### Table 3. Number of people in the Middle East internally displaced annually (millions)

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: (including Iran)
Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Center: Global Report on Internal Displacement

The very small and declining share of world exports of the non-oil producing countries in the region reflects the fact that they have very little to sell abroad. Their economies are not competitive and when the structure of their exports is examined, the picture is even worse. This is largely due to the fact that the largest non-oil (or almost non-oil) Arab economy is Egypt. In 2017, over 70 percent of its exports consisted of three groups of products: minerals and chemical products, agricultural products, and textiles. This very narrow range of products, with limited added value, reflects the weakness of the industrialization process (Malik, 2019).

### Population Displacement

By the end of 2019, approximately 18 million Arab citizens were displaced, largely as a result of war, including some 5.6 million Syrians who fled abroad (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 2020). Their lives have been massively affected, with consequences for their health, the education of children, employment, and income. As a result, poverty rates increased and inequalities between and within the countries of the region have increased (Table 3).

In 2019, the population of countries suffering war or governmental breakdown—Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen—totaled 115 million, 27 percent of the total Arab population.

### The Distribution of Income and Wealth

The Middle East is the region with the highest level of income inequality in the world. In the period 1990-2016, income share of the top decile in total income equaled 64 percent, compared to 37 percent in Western Europe, 47 percent in the US, and 55 percent in Brazil. This was due to enormous inequality between countries (particularly between oil-rich and population-rich countries) and within countries. The latter is probably underestimated, given limited access to fiscal data (Alvaredo, Assouad, & Piketty, 2019).

Between 2011 and 2018, the region experienced an increase in poverty. The rate of poverty, defined as the share of the population with daily income of up to $1.90 (US 2011 prices, at purchasing power parity), rose from 2.3 percent to 7.2 percent. The number of people living in poverty rose from 8 million to 28 million. This was the only region in the developing world
to experience significant increases in poverty (World Bank, 2020).

In 2019, the Arab region’s 37 richest billionaires (all of whom were men) had the same amount of wealth as the bottom half of the adult population, totaling about $108 billion. In 2020, their number fell to 31, holding $92.1 billion (UN Economic and Social Committee for West Asia, 2020b).

The existence of extreme wealth and poverty in the Arab region is due to the concentration of oil wealth, the lack of public infrastructure, redistributive taxation, safety nets, and conflict. Wealth differences between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and their conflict-stricken neighbors, including Iraq, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, are very large. However, information on wealth distribution is sparse, due to extensive wealth hiding and tax evasion (UN Economic and Social Committee for West Asia, 2020c).

Structural Factors
The high level of inequality was the consequence of long-lasting structural factors. The Gulf countries, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan are rentier states. Their economies depend mostly on incomes from oil, gas, remittances, and foreign aid. These resources have usually been controlled by hereditary rulers or by institutions that were controlled by the political leadership and their partners in the private sector, with the lines between public and private capital being blurred. This creates important advantages for elites and has resulted in clientelism and corruption. This institutionalized rent-seeking prevented the development of political checks against the growth of opaque business-government relations and mechanisms allowing for a redistribution of wealth. Elites appropriated significant shares of the main sources of revenue, which created large wealth and income disparities. In the Arab Gulf, an increase in the price of oil resulted in a rise in the proportion of hidden wealth. In those countries, elites placed funds in offshore accounts.

The ability of elites to appropriate part of their country’s main revenues is not restricted to oil producers and has been widely documented in other countries, such as Lebanon (Khan, 2019). Ethnic, religious, tribal, or familial cleavages also encourage extreme inequality because they encourage the formation of patronage, corruption, and clientelist networks. The division of national spoils along these lines increases the rents that can be extracted, deepening inequality levels. A second effect of rentier economies is that governments do not need to rely on taxation to fund spending. As a result, they have fewer incentives to develop strong state capacity to respond effectively to public welfare needs, or to be accountable to citizens.

In consequence, the ratio of taxation to GDP is relatively low in most countries of the region, and in parts of the region it has fallen even further. Arab states also have relatively weak social protection systems, with only 30-40 percent of the population of the Arab world formally covered by welfare services. In Iraq and Lebanon, the state has failed to provide even basic services.

Recent developments have increased inequality and help explain the protests in the Middle East throughout 2019 and into early 2020. The decline in oil prices led to the removal or reduction of subsidies on fuel, electricity, or water. As a result, oil producers and other Arab countries adopted austerity measures to offset increases in their budget deficits. Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, as well as Algeria, Egypt, and Lebanon, have either raised the value-added tax on goods and services or announced plans to do so. These measures reduce the welfare of the most vulnerable segments of the population and further exacerbate their already precarious living conditions. This has happened while many people, especially the young, are unemployed, and millions live in poverty.
The combination of widening inequality and growing poverty makes for a combustible mix in Middle East societies and will continue to undermine stability if it is not addressed. Widening inequality levels fuel conflict and political instability, while tending to consolidate autocratic power.

The relationship between economic and political power has become a major concern in the wake of neoliberal economic reforms that many Arab states tried to half-heartedly implement in the 1990s. Arab countries liberalized their economies without liberalizing their politics and autocrats in power across the region. In order to do this, in the face of rising social grievances, they repressed people, and also markets. Some of the resulting inequality and social exclusion is in sharp contrast to the riches amassed by those business elites closely connected to the rulers. Part of this inequality is attributable to economic disparities within countries, which are due the concentration of economic and political power at the top (Diwan, Malik, & Atiyas, 2019, p. 2).

Recent developments in a number of states have been called the “New Arab Spring.” In December 2018, for example, an increase in bread prices resulted in demonstrations in Sudan that ultimately led to the downfall of then-President Omar al-Bashir, an event with geo-political consequences. The fall of Bashir resulted in the weakening of Islamic fundamentalism in Sudan and a move toward democracy. There were also implications for its foreign relations: diplomatic links with Iran ceased in 2016. Since 2019 Sudan has moved closer to the US, and in 2020 it moved toward establishing diplomatic ties with Israel.

In Egypt in September 2019, an exiled businessman and former building contractor for the military, recorded a video showing how President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi had embezzled public funds to finance, among other things, a luxury home for himself. The video went viral and resulted in mass protests. In October 2019, Iraqi protesters took to the streets to demand basic services, including clean water and electricity. At the same time, a revolt began in Lebanon after the government announced a tax on WhatsApp and other mobile applications. This followed a long list of austerity measures taken during the year that disproportionately affected the most vulnerable among the population (Assouad, 2020).

The Impact of COVID-19

By the end of October 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases reported in Arab countries was similar to the region’s share in the world population, but the number of deaths reported was much lower. Both the number of cases and the number of deaths have likely been seriously underreported, partly because of conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

According to the UN, in the early months of the pandemic, transmission and mortality rates for COVID-19 were lower than the global average. More recent trends have been a cause for concern, especially in light of weak health care systems and the lack of primary care in many countries. The pandemic has also magnified many underlying challenges. These include violence and conflict; inequalities; unemployment; poverty; inadequate social safety nets; human rights concerns; insufficiently responsive institutions and governance systems; and an inadequate economic model (United Nations, 2020b).

In October 2020, the International Monetary Fund forecast that in 2020 national income in the Arab countries would fall by 5 percent as a result of the fall in the price of oil and the...
effects of the COVID-19 crisis. The balance of payments current account and fiscal balances are also expected to deteriorate sharply and inflation accelerate (Table 4).

The number living in poverty is forecast to rise by 14.3 million people, to more than 115 million, one quarter of the total Arab population. Many of the newly poor were recently in the middle class and, if their impoverishment is prolonged, social and political stability might be affected. With its dependence on food imports, the region may also witness food shortages and price hikes. The ILO estimated that the equivalent of 17 million full time jobs were lost in the second quarter of 2020, in a region where 14.3 million people were already unemployed.

Young people were already five times more likely to be unemployed than adults. With the largest gender gap in human development in the world, Arab women are likely to suffer significant consequences of the pandemic. Gender equality legislation and participation by women in the labor market are behind other parts of the world. Women earn on average 79 percent less than men on a per capita basis and they may lose 700,000 jobs, particularly in the informal sector where they constitute 62 percent of workers.

Migrants, who account for 40 percent of all workers in the region, will be hard hit by the pandemic, in terms of access to services, job losses, and ability to return to their countries of origin. Some 56 million people in the region need humanitarian assistance, including 26 million who have been forcibly displaced. 74 million people are at a higher risk of contracting the virus due to lack of handwashing facilities. COVID-19 is also likely to exacerbate wealth inequality as it has in other regions.

The ability of oil-rich countries to provide adequate stimulus and recovery packages is limited, as a result of the fall in the demand for, and price of, oil. This has reinforced the need to diversify sources of revenue beyond oil and embark on low-carbon development.

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could lead to higher unemployment, as was the case in past recessions.

The sharp fall and a slow recovery in remittances could increase the number of new extreme poor, especially in fragile and conflict-affected states. Real GDP in the region could remain below pre-crisis levels for a decade (United Nations, 2020b; International Monetary Fund, 2020).

**Conclusion**

Under Arab socialism, the political system was authoritarian but the economic one was inclusive, in that it generated employment. It was, however, inefficient and ultimately unsustainable.

Under the influence of the Washington Consensus, the economic system became more exclusive, generating less employment. The strategy was for the private sector to take over the leading role in the economy, but the cronyism that developed also resulted in inefficient and unsustainable development as well as extreme income inequality. At the same time, demographic growth added to pressures on the labor market. The combination of these factors helped to bring about the Arab Spring. The regimes that survived the event of 2010-2011, continued the same policies: sometimes they doused the flames of discontent with handouts that were increasingly difficult to fund or repressed discontent with force.

Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, with a combined population of almost 100 million, have descended into chaos or near chaos. The opposition to military or military-backed regimes was disorganized and ineffective, reflecting long lasting structures in Arab societies including the absence of a powerful middle class. Tunisia has demonstrated greater political pluralism, but the economy remains weak. Since 2019, there have been encouraging signs that Sudan and maybe even Algeria are moving away from authoritarian rule and that the alternative to the military may no longer be Islamic fundamentalism, another form of authoritarianism.

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The primary trends that have emerged in the Middle East in the last decade fall into two interrelated and complementary groups. The first reflects the impact of global trends and the second can be traced to regional currents. The ten years since the Arab Spring have changed the Middle East. The new reality manifests itself in an increased demand for social and economic reforms, which in turn contributes to a high level of internal instability, i.e., to new waves of social unrest. Concern about the US intention to cut back its military commitments has led Arab countries to rely on strategic diversification. They maintain their traditional orientation toward the United States, but at the same time establish ties with Russia and China. To some degree the Arab-Israeli normalization is caused by a search for a new security provider. The Arab Spring has contributed to the rise of regional hegemons—Turkey, Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia—that have become more assertive in implementing their strategic goals. In fact the local powers, vigorously advancing their agendas, have more often than not overplayed their global partners.

Keywords: trends, conflicts, normalization, regional hegemons, non-state actors, global powers, new bipolarity
Global Trends and their Projection onto the Region

The impact of global trends on the region can be seen on three principal levels. First, the newly emerged global bipolarity, in the form of the rivalry between the United States and China, has not had a decisive impact on the Middle East. The United States, despite its intentions to reduce its presence and commitments across the region, still possesses the most powerful and influential military, remains a dominant political and economic player, and continues to embody the cultural aspects of globalization.

To be sure, China is now an influential actor in the region, with impressive economic and technological capabilities. Beijing has expanded its influence in the Middle East mostly through the oil and gas sector and infrastructure projects, in particular those undertaken in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-related countries. An example of how Beijing has stepped up its activities is the agreement China National Offshore Oil Corporation signed with ADNOC, the state oil company of Abu Dhabi, on July 22, 2019. The sides agreed to “search for and develop new opportunities for cooperation” in the oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) sectors (Manukov, 2020). Strategically, China considers the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to be critical, and therefore established its first foreign military base in Djibouti. Beijing also invests heavily in commercial ports, including Pakistan’s Gwadar and Oman’s Duqm port, both strategically located on opposite sides of the Gulf of Oman. There is some concern in the region (especially on the part of Israel, Turkey, and a number of Arab states) about the prospects of China’s partnership with Iran. Countries in the region are focused on making sure that Iran and China do not form a partnership of sorts, which they fear might get out of control.

That said, the extent to which China has entered the Middle East and become a leading external player should not be exaggerated. While Middle East partners of the US are already recipients of Chinese technologies and investments, as Ori Sela and Brandon Friedman have noted, “If there is an area where rising Sino-American tension may force difficult choices in these countries, it is China’s continued effort to introduce new global digital and communications infrastructure and standards” (Sela & Friedman, 2020). It goes without saying that digital and communications standards are useful tools of influence for Beijing, but they fall short in terms of providing China with a dominant position in the region. Finally, the cultural gap between China and regional powers prevents more active exchanges. In 2018, for example, students from Arab countries did not appear on the top list of international students studying in China by country of origin (Statistical Report, 2019).

On a second level, tensions between Russia and the West (a residue of the Cold War era) remain, but they are no longer capable of shaping the system of relations in the region. The Middle East has not become a place in which relations among global powers can be construed as positive. Nonetheless, there are still areas in which the global powers cooperate, such as Russian-American deconflicting policies in Syria, the Geneva process, negotiations on Libya under the auspices of the UN, and the fight against terrorism. At the same time, even a modest level of Russian collaboration with the Western countries would not be possible were Russia not strengthening its military-strategic and political positions in the region. Moscow’s Middle East course is thus the result of its confident stance on the world stage, which allowed it to take far-reaching decisions.

Moscow has become an important player and has demonstrated its ability to be a game changer. The growth of its military-technical and economic ties with Middle East states is evident. Russia has acquired strategically important military bases on the Mediterranean coast. Since it possesses mostly hard power, its success in the region can be partly attributed to the willingness of some local states to see
Russia’s presence as a counterweight to US dominance. According to some estimates, a quasi-Cold War situation has provided these states with better maneuvering options.

On a third level, a high degree of uncertainty, a noticeable trait of contemporary international relations, is now clearly manifested in the Middle East. Moreover, local conflicts and clashes now have the ability to contribute to global unpredictability. In a forecast prepared by the Institute of World Economy and International Relations under the Russian Academy of Sciences, uncertainty was labeled as “negative” certainty. “Uncertainty, as one of the characteristics of international relations in recent years, is giving way to negative certainty in the medium-term horizon of 2024-2025” (Russia and the World 2020, 2019). To be sure, uncertainty in international relations is far from a new phenomenon. Throughout history one can observe events that could not have been predicted, but were later perceived as entirely logical. For the Middle East, uncertainty has long been the norm and a sign of a rapidly changing picture of relations among the main players.

Regional Trends
Regional dynamics sometimes mirror global trends, albeit with variations. At other times they even surpass them and serve as signals of future international shifts and changes. Thus, the large-scale social movements and demonstrations that erupted in the Middle East beginning in late 2010 and were eventually labeled the Arab Spring, soon become a signal of global distress. Subsequently, Spain, France, Venezuela, the United States, and Belarus were no less affected by such protest movements, which, despite the inherent differences in culture and circumstances, are inspired by a common longing for justice and dignity.

The dominance of domestic agendas, whereby any actions in the international arena are carried out with an eye to placating domestic audiences, has frequently been a recognizable attribute of state policy in Middle East countries. Taking an active role in foreign endeavors is designed to compensate for failures in domestic affairs and to ensure the mobilization of the masses around certain elite groups. Appealing to a country’s historical background, with the hope to reclaim former greatness and influence, also plays a significant role.

Such actions are easy to discern, for example, in the politics of Turkey and Iran. In Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, a long-serving political leader, is adept at using Israel’s foreign policy agenda to ensure that he maintains his position of power and that his electorate continues to support him, regardless of the country’s economic and social difficulties. Recently, however, such inward-looking foreign policy has been increasingly observed in the world’s leading powers. Thus, President Trump utilized his foreign policy achievements to boost his ratings with a domestic audience as proof of his effectiveness. In Russia, foreign policy news stories dominated the media when compared to the domestic agenda, at least before the pandemic struck.

On a related note, that regional forces have become more active and that competition between them has increased as a result confirms the thesis that the process of transition occurring in the system of international relations provides medium and small countries more opportunities for maneuver. The temporary absence of an external organizing force (or forces) allows regional players to behave more assertively. It is also possible that the very retrenchment of Great Powers produces new situations and dynamics that foment a sense of insecurity that prompts regional powers to act. This may be true not only of states, but also of various types of non-state armed groups, which are rapidly learning and becoming more professional due to their participation in regional conflicts.

At present, the primary regional actors are Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, which have all taken advantage of the slowing development of some Arab states resulting from conflicts or the aggravation of social and economic
problems. These aspiring hegemons are skillfully using their resources and influence as well as economic, political, and military capabilities. Iran, currently under sanctions, still manages to maintain some economic stability in its attempts to create a “resistance economy,” which, nevertheless, now faces even bigger challenges brought on by the drop in world oil prices and the impact of the coronavirus. Turkey is not afraid to demonstrate its readiness to use military force in different situations and war theaters in a more assertive manner. Saudi Arabia does not shy away from emphasizing its special role, not only in the Middle East, but also beyond its borders. Israel is a powerful player that prefers to leverage its military might and achievements in science and technology as the main drivers of progress.

Russia has managed to establish good relations with the local powers, but these relationships often lack predictability. The regional powers, have interests of their own that they pursue with no regard to the global partner. Thus Russia-Turkey relations are an uneasy and fragile alliance that has already experienced a number of crises. Ankara’s relations with its NATO allies have also become more conflictual. The Russian-Iranian “marriage of convenience” may enable the two countries to iron out bumps, but it can hardly make Iran more responsive to Russia’s interests. Despite good relations with Moscow, Israel continues its raids on Iran’s facilities, demonstrating Russia’s inability to close Syria’s airspace. August 2018 saw a serious crisis between the two states when the Syrian forces downed a Russian IL 20 by mistake amid an Israeli raid.

The local players are becoming more independent in their political behavior. This only adds assertiveness to their familiar political style. Small and even some medium powers are known for reacting much more quickly to events, though not always in balanced fashion. They are often ready to raise the stakes, thereby leaving their opponents with no chance to save face. Likewise, they might quickly elect to launch an armed conflict or sever diplomatic relations. In the Middle East, rapidly transitioning to violent conflict or escalating political tensions, all in the absence of an existential threat, has traditionally been a trademark of local behavior and a distinctive feature of inter-regional relations.

**Conflict as a Systemic Factor**

The regional system has always been conflict-prone. Almost all nations in the region are involved in open or latent conflicts. They do not participate in organizations that provide transparency or control over them, and as a rule they have vague ideas about each other’s intentions, especially since the nations themselves are not always able to assess rationally their own aspirations.

Since 2010, conflicts, regardless of their nature and area, have begun to multiply and become increasingly systemic, quickly becoming the framework for regional relations. Even an internal conflict can be immediately internationalized, and regional state and non-state actors alike are drawn into its orbit, offering support to their clients while striving to increase their own influence. Evidence of these trends can easily be seen in the conflicts in Yemen, Syria, and Libya.

There are numerous examples of escalation. The rapidly escalating confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia has included attacks on key infrastructure and industrial facilities. Israel is actively using military force in promoting its interests in the region. Fears that the Syrian conflict would provide Iran with a foothold in close proximity to Israel’s borders and would therefore result in a substantial increase in Tehran’s assistance to Hezbollah led to frequent Israeli airstrikes on Iranian facilities in Syria, and partly on Syrian military targets. Iraq’s government blamed Israel for targeting Iran-allied Popular Mobilization Forces positions in Iraq, along with Shiite militia bases near Baghdad. Turkey, in turn, has conducted an active military strategy in Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the South Caucasus.
Just as evident is the fragmentation of participants in conflicts, particularly when field commanders and various armed fighters take matters into their own hands, at which point there is a clear onset of the so-called de-sovereignization of states, whereby they gradually lose their monopoly on the legitimate use of military force. During conflicts, a change in functional roles can occur—indeed independent and illegal military groups may become part of the armed forces, and then once again break away from official structures. They are trained with the help of external sponsors and turn into semi-professional armies.

Contemporary Middle East conflicts are overwhelmingly asymmetric. Even before the Arab Spring it was obvious that the era of classical wars involving regular armies is over. The present day conflicts occur on the territory of one or more adjacent states, and their asymmetry and hybrid nature are manifested in the types of actors involved, i.e., non-state actors as militias vs. state actors. More non-state armed militant groups have emerged in the last eight years than in the previous eight decades, setting a trend that will define conflict in the coming decade, i.e., the further proliferation of armed militant groups.

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The conflicts also may involve varying degrees of external interference from regional and/or global powers. The entry of new national elites into the political fold, their struggle for territory and resources, their yearning for self-determination that can only be achieved through independent statehood—all these elements of confrontation guarantee that these regions will become increasingly fragmented, notwithstanding globalization. Conflicts most often arise on the ruins of empires, in multi-ethnic states, and/or in cases when central governments grow weak and begin losing strict control over their national areas. Ethnic and religious mobilization, in turn, contributes to the further weakening of state foundations. As a conflict progresses, violence starts being perceived as acceptable in society and raises the level of a state’s overall aggression.

It is in these types of conflicts that politicized identities become both a driver of the conflict (the contrast between “us and them”) and an important tool in the hands of opponents. Numerous proxy wars or elements thereof (Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya) serve as examples of strategic and tactical alliances that are based on common elements of identity (confessional, ethnic, tribal).

In tandem, interstate conflicts (Iran-Saudi Arabia, Iran-Israel, Saudi Arabia-Qatar), carried out directly or through proxies, proceed without interruption. They also have identifiable traits that contribute to mutually distorted perceptions of the opponent’s intentions and plans. For example, the Saudi Arabia-Iran conflict, which in principle could be settled politically, has become seemingly insurmountable due to how the conflict is interpreted by the parties. In 2020, Saudi Arabia, unlike other Gulf states, refused to provide Iran with humanitarian aid related to the pandemic, this despite the fact that in 2019 it participated in indirect contacts with Iran. This uncompromising attitude stems from the perception of the conflict as a zero-sum game. According to James M. Dorsey, “resolving the tug of war in the Middle East will require a backing away from approaches that treat conflicts as zero-sum games, and engagement by all regional and external players. To achieve that, players would have to recognize that in many ways, perceptions on both sides of the
Gulf divide are mirror images of one another: all parties see each other as existential threats” (Dorsey, 2020).

Confessional and religious identities, despite their functional similarity with other factors of collective identity, still retain their own special features. “Religion can define reality...It links cognitive definitions of ultimate reality with structures backed by emotion and obligation. In so doing, it can authorize, legitimate, enable, and even require violent action in the face of urgent threats, profanations of sacred symbols and extreme otherhood” (Brubaker, 2015). While religious and confessional factors can turn conflicts into conflicts of values, their use has been instrumental and pragmatic, reflecting the tasks facing elites, such as the need to find allies and make the confrontation civilizational and valuable. This confessional dimension, which colors the conflict in its own way, is by no means its cause and, in some situations, does not prevent the normalization and rapprochement of former opponents dictated by pragmatic considerations. The contradictions between Iran and Saudi Arabia are not caused by doctrinal differences, and the processes of radicalization cannot be considered solely a product of religious belief or their respective ethnic cultures. Ana Belen Soage offers a fair assessment of the conflict, writing:

Once invoked, sectarianism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the dehumanisation of the other exacerbates the scale and viciousness of the hostilities. Nevertheless, a full understanding of the situation requires revisiting the historical and geopolitical context that has led to an increase in sectarian strife over the last decade or so. Such an exercise reveals that sectarian narratives often conceal more prosaic motivations, and that the current cold war in the Middle East has more to do with ideological competition, regime survival and the regional balance of power than with the Saqifa gathering or the Battle of Karbala. (Soage, 2017)

Tehran’s rhetoric of opposing Israel and the United States resonates with the mood of Arab and Muslims on the street and undermines the image of Riyadh, which has edged toward the gradual normalization of relations with Israel and is an ally of the US.

During the Arab Spring, Tehran presented its Islamic Revolution not as a Shiite event, but as a model for the entire Muslim world. Thus, pragmatic motives prompted Iran not to focus on the Shiite nature of its revolution. Rather, it quickly became clear that sectarianism was hindering the export of the Iranian revolution in the context of growing social protests in the Arab states. At the same time, in its confrontation with Saudi Arabia or in its activities in Syria and Iraq, the confessional (Shiite) factor played a crucial role among its allies (Hezbollah, Shiite militias). For Saudi Arabia, Sunna, when seen through the lens of the Wahhabi, reinforces its claims of being leader of the entire Muslim world and also creates additional opportunities to contain Iran, which has been trying to project its influence onto Shiite communities in some Arab countries. Thus Saudi Arabia feels threatened by the ideology promoted by Iran, which attracts many Muslims. In particular, Tehran’s rhetoric of opposing Israel and the United States resonates with the mood of Arab and Muslims on the street and undermines the image of Riyadh, which has edged toward the gradual normalization of relations with Israel and is an ally of the US.

Instrumentalism in the use of confessional identity, widely practiced by Middle East actors, has its manifestations in the Iran-Syria alliance. While it is commonly believed that the two are united by a common Shiite identity, their ties in fact are based not so much on confessional factors but rather on pragmatic considerations. The Shia basis of their alliance appears
A common enemy can become a driver for rapprochement between long-term opponents. That both Israel and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a mutual conflict with Iran and have concerns about Turkey’s increasingly active regional posturing contributed to the gradual warming of relations between them.

Political institutions in Iraq that were formed on a confessional (Shiite) basis after the US invasion proved to be ill-prepared and unable to ensure security and stable development. The response was the rise of the Islamic State (initially ISIS—Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), a terrorist organization that incorporated politically marginalized Sunnis, primarily former military personnel of Iraq, and Baath activists.

The conflict in Yemen also has features of an identity clash, but in this country the conflict is more multi-level and complex, including not only sectarian but also tribal and territorial dimensions. Internal and external forces use these identities very pragmatically. As a result, this conflict is sometimes perceived as a proxy war with a sectarian accent, reflecting the Iran–Saudi Arabia confrontation.

Identity politics that are widely used by the parties in the Middle East can be overshadowed by common social goals. For instance, the Shiites and the Sunnis came out together against Iranian dominance in protests in Iraq during the autumn of 2019 (Belen’kaya, 2019). The struggle against corruption in Lebanon has played a unifying role for different sectarian and religious groups.

Normalization as a Step toward a New Regional Balance

A common enemy can become a driver for rapprochement between long-term opponents. That both Israel and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a mutual conflict with Iran and have concerns about Turkey’s increasingly active regional posturing contributed to the gradual warming of relations between them. Bolstered by US support, UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco have concluded agreements with Israel. Even more importantly, such normalization of relations can be attributed to modernization trends that have also been more pronounced in the region. They signal the overcoming of old prejudices and the emergence of new military-political and technological ties among the former adversaries. These heralded peace accords have created a new balance of power in the Middle East.

Some observers even believe that Mohammed bin Zayed, colloquially known as MBZ, has a far reaching and ambitious plan for a full strategic alliance between the moderate Sunni countries and Israel, with the US contributing to the overall package with massive arms sales (Baskin, 2020). In any case, the inclusion of Israel in the security scheme of the Gulf monarchies will bring forth new challenges for them and for Israel. For the Arabs, the new peace accentuates a difficult task of preparing public opinion, given that for the public, the Palestinian issue remains
a priority and Israel a historical foe. Although clearly there has been a certain marginalization of the Palestinian issue, it remains on the agenda and demands international attention. As for Israel, its new role as a provider of security might turn out to be quite difficult to reconcile in the context of the continuing conflict and in terms of the traditional obligations of Israel’s new partners to the Arab and Muslim world.

The new trend of normalization of relations has emerged under the impact of individual political decisions that have gradually culminated in a new system of regional interaction. The agreement signed by Israel and Jordan in August 2020 opens more flight paths over both countries, including new routes over Israel for Qatar, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain (Blumenthal, 2020). The agreement with Sudan, finalized following the Abraham Accords, also opens new routes for Israeli flights. The agreements are a testament to Israel’s growing integration into the Middle East.

Conclusion

The trends discussed in this paper, increasingly visible in the Middle East, are signs of serious changes in the balance of forces and speak loudly of efforts to overcome longstanding psychological barriers, what Harold Saunders, an architect of Camp David, called the “other walls” (Saunders, 1991). These slow-moving currents are not necessarily irreversible, but they are new for the region and look promising. They indicate that regional policy is becoming more independent. The continuing study of regional international relations allows us to conclude that they do not always copy global trends. On the contrary, they can even precede them and set the tone. The normalization of relations in the Middle East gives us a glimpse of what long-awaited stability can look like. If tensions can abate in the Middle East, a region famous for its conflicts and turmoil, then future pragmatic and responsible actions of world players might also reduce international turbulence and tensions.

References

This article examines how key actors in the Middle East came to view the United States as disengaging from the Middle East in the decade following the Arab Spring uprisings. This perception was evident not only in the statements from key officials across the region, but more importantly, in the actions of principal regional actors, particularly from 2015 to 2020. The article argues that it is a paradox that the United States is perceived as withdrawing from the region given the scope of the US military presence and the importance of the US military operations in the region over the last decade, particularly in Iraq and Syria. At the heart of this paradox are US statements implying that diplomacy and force are mutually exclusive alternatives for US policy. The challenge facing the Biden administration will be convincing the region that “aggressive diplomacy” is a complement and not a substitute for a credible military deterrent.

Keywords: Arab Spring, United States, Syria, Iraq, disengagement, diplomacy
Introduction

Since 2011, there has been an ongoing debate whether the US was withdrawing or disengaging from the Middle East, despite the fact that former Obama officials, like Derek Chollet (2017), have referred to the notion of American withdrawal from Middle East as a “myth” (Chollet, Sullivan, Simes, & Long, 2017, p. 6). Indeed, as Micah Zenko has shown, in terms of facts on the ground, the notion of a physical withdrawal or disengagement seems hardly to square with reality. The US maintains large troop deployments in the Middle East (approximately 54,000 in September 2017); it also has multiple air bases and conducts regular naval port visits. Moreover, there are bilateral security programs across the region that include weapons sales, training, consulting, logistical support, and intelligence sharing and support (Zenko, 2018; see also Juneau, 2014).

Rather, the belief that the US was disengaging from the region was rooted in the US discourse and actions during the Obama administration, which was actively recalibrating how the US should “rightsize” its role in the region (Bahgat & Sharp, 2014; Hamid, 2015; Hunter, 2015; Lynch, 2015). This contributed to a recurring refrain sounded across the region over the past decade since the 2010-2011 Arab Spring uprisings, namely that the US was retreating from the Middle East (Al Shayji, 2013; Inbar, 2016; Lipner, 2017; Melham, 2016; Nafi, 2016; Obaid, 2016b; Taheri, 2013; Young, 2011). Paradoxically, this claim was reiterated persistently despite the fact that the US played a major role in the military intervention that toppled Muammar al-Qaddafi’s regime in Libya in 2011, and despite America’s role in assembling and leading a military coalition of more than 70 countries to destroy the State of the Islamic Caliphate between 2014 and 2017 (and its caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi). This dissonance between the actual scope and importance of the US military presence and operations in the region, and the widespread perception throughout the region that the US was withdrawing or disengaging from the Middle East, is the great paradox of the past decade in the region.

The growing perception of a declining American presence in the Middle East has paralleled a recurring theme in the recent literature on international politics that the structure of the international system has changed over the last decade (2011-2019). This idea is most commonly articulated as a shift from what was a post-Cold War unipolar system dominated by the United States to a multipolar system of several Great Powers, including China, Russia, and the US, but dominated by no one. This line of reasoning is based on theoretical literature that assumes that polarity is a central fact of international politics. The concept of polarity is based on ranking the relative power of countries, which is determined by assessing the relative distribution of military and economic power among states.

This dissonance between the actual scope and importance of the US military presence and operations in the region, and the widespread perception throughout the region that the US was withdrawing or disengaging from the Middle East, is the great paradox of the past decade in the region.

The idea of a multipolar world has become part of conventional wisdom—so much so, in fact, that within months of each other Russian President Vladimir Putin (in May 2014) and Chinese President Xi Jinping (in November 2014) declared the world to be “multipolar.” Despite the widespread acceptance of this concept in evaluating the balance of power in international politics, recent scholarship has raised the question of whether aggregate material power is the best way to gauge historical change in the structure of international politics (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015-2016). Nevertheless, it is not the purpose of this essay to challenge the conventional wisdom that a new multipolar international system has emerged.
For much of the Middle East, US disengagement from the region would represent a sharp break from the historical pattern of Western involvement in managing the security affairs of the region over the past century.

Instead, this essay explains how US actions in the Middle East over the last decade have led regional actors to perceive the US as withdrawing or disengaging from the region. The central argument is that since 2009, American leaders have elected to minimize security commitments in the region and restrict strategic engagements, leaving the impression of a “power vacuum” that has led regional powers—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates—to project power beyond their borders in an attempt to fill the vacuum. However, the widespread perception that has emerged in the Middle East over the last decade was not that the US’s relative economic or military power has declined, but rather that the attitudes of American leaders about how the US should use its military power to uphold its security commitments in the Middle East have changed distinctly. While there were significant differences between the Obama and Trump administrations’ policies toward the Middle East from 2009 to 2020, the perception in the region has been that both the Obama and Trump administrations were seeking to reduce US military commitments to the region.

The Legacy of American Engagement in the Middle East

The United States, shaped by exigencies of the Cold War, has played an integral role in managing the security affairs of the Middle East since World War II. In this it succeeded the British and French, who played the leading roles in establishing the Middle East state system following World War I. The US created a chain of global security partners and institutions that were intended to contain the expansion of Soviet influence during the Cold War. In the Middle East, the Baghdad Pact and its successor the Central Treaty Organization (1955-1979), which initially included Iraq, Iran, and Turkey (as well as Pakistan), represented the US effort to shape the security architecture of the region in line with its global interests. These relationships were put into practice during US operations conducted under the auspices of the Eisenhower Doctrine (1957-1960), the Nixon Doctrine (1969-1976), and the Carter Doctrine (1980-the present). Therefore, for much of the Middle East, US disengagement from the region would represent a sharp break from the historical pattern of Western involvement in managing the security affairs of the region over the past century.

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, US policy objectives in the region have consisted of securing access to oil, brokering Arab-Israeli peace, countering terrorist threats,
and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. More broadly, US regional partners came to rely on the US to use its power to maintain stability in the region. Once the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended (1989-1991), the US found itself as the sole global superpower. It exercised its power and influence during the 1990-1991 Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm), rolling back Saddam Hussein's August 1990 invasion and occupation of Kuwait. Washington mobilized a coalition of 35 countries to defeat Iraq and secured UN Resolution 678, which authorized the coalition to use “all necessary means” to reverse the aggression. The US pursued a policy of “dual containment” against both Iraq and Iran during the 1990s, effectively sanctioning and isolating both regimes. It also expanded its commitments in the Persian Gulf during this period, creating a web of strong security partnerships with all the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The Arab Gulf States were added to the US’s longtime security partners in the region, which included Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, as well as Israel and Turkey (Jeffrey & Eisenstadt, 2016).

A decade after the end of the Cold War, on September 11, 2001, the United States was attacked by al-Qaeda in simultaneous attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. George W. Bush’s administration responded to the suicide plane attacks by invading Afghanistan and toppling the Taliban government in 2001, and then removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq in 2003. While the military operations led to swift victories, the post-war stabilization and occupation of both countries proved enormously challenging and prohibitively expensive. These American wars did not decisively defeat al-Qaeda or destroy the appeal of Salafi-jihadism, and did not result in stable, pro-American, democratic governments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, Iraq appears to be fighting to avoid becoming a dependent of Iran, and Afghanistan is still fighting to avoid a Taliban takeover, even as the Islamic State gains ground there as well. The overarching political effect of these wars in the US was to generate widespread skepticism about the efficacy of using military force to advance US interests abroad.

The Obama administration’s perspective was that the previous administration had mismanaged American power and allowed the US’s military commitments in the Middle East to command a disproportionate amount of resources at the expense of other, more urgent priorities. Obama viewed the drag on American power caused by the war on terror as ultimately empowering US rivals, with the US unilateral approach alienating partners. There were four practical consequences of these views. The first was that Obama took “a more restrained, economical, and precise approach to using US military power” (Brands, 2016; see also Chollet, 2016). Second, Obama emphasized diplomatic engagement, with both allies and adversaries. Third, Obama sought to rebalance US engagement geographically. He believed that the US needed to redirect its strategic resources away from the Middle East and toward the Asia-Pacific region. Fourth, during the Obama years, defense spending was significantly reduced, from $849.9 billion in 2010 to $669.5 billion in 2016.

The economic shock of the global financial crisis between 2008 and 2012 created a public debate in the US about whether the country could and should continue its profligate defense and military spending during a period that became known as the Great Recession (Parent & MacDonald, 2011; Brooks, Ikenberry, & Wohlfforth, 2012-2013). In particular, the US’s post-Cold War decision to maintain its security commitments to partners and allies in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia came under renewed scrutiny. During the Cold War, these commitments were made to prevent Soviet encroachment into the world’s wealthiest and potentially most resource-rich states. After the Cold War, the logic of maintaining the commitments was to advance the aims
of the three core objectives of the US grand strategy: reducing near and long term threats to US national security; “promoting a liberal economic order to expand the global economy and maximize domestic prosperity”; and “maintaining the global institutional order to secure necessary interstate cooperation on terms favorable to US interests” (Brooks et al., 2012-2013). The US commitment to its security partners and allies was a constant in US foreign policy from the end of World War II through the Obama administration.

**During Obama’s first term in office, his Middle East team believed the region’s importance was exaggerated, as were the risks it posed to US interests.**

**The Arab Spring and US Pullback from the Middle East, 2010-2011**

During the years following the global financial crisis (2008-2012), US security commitments to the Middle East began to be more critically examined and debated, with a particular emphasis on evaluating the return the US received on the cost of maintaining its military commitments abroad. Domestic critics bemoaned the growing US budget deficits and the billions spent on defense personnel and infrastructure during a period of economic crisis, and called for one form or another of military downsizing and greater distribution of the burden with respect to international security commitments. Other critics argued that the US security partnerships engendered resistance to US power that was counterproductive, creating more friction than leverage for the US abroad. Finally, a third line of argument claimed that resources devoted to maintain US commitments abroad could instead be used in service of domestic goals such as infrastructure, education, civilian research and development, and innovation that would increase US global competitiveness more than its military commitments abroad (Brooks et al., 2012-2013). These views planted doubts among US partners and rivals alike about the US’s appetite for maintaining its security commitments in the Middle East (Hokayem & Wasser, 2014).

To be sure, there were good reasons for these doubts. During Obama’s first term in office, his Middle East team believed the region’s importance was exaggerated, as were the risks it posed to US interests. They claimed the region did not really need the US to the extent held by the conventional wisdom in Washington, and that the US presence actually contributed to the region’s problem. Not only could the US afford to disengage from the Middle East, but the region would be better off for it. And even if the situation in the region soured, it wouldn’t affect core US interests (Pollack, Pillar, Tarzi, & Freeman, 2014; Pollack & Takeyh, 2014).

In the Middle East, these doubts about the US commitment to the region were exacerbated by three developments at the end of Barack Obama’s first term. First, in 2010 and 2011 the US completed its military withdrawal from Iraq. Second, the US withdrew its support for the Mubarak regime in Egypt during the January-February 2011 Arab Spring uprising. Third, the US backed the multilateral military operation that toppled Muammar al-Qaddafi from power in Libya during the Arab Spring, but its “light footprint approach” provided little strategic leverage in the aftermath of the intervention (Brands, 2016). The Obama administration was guided by the principle, “engage where we must, disengage when we can.” This approach was driven by the administration’s perception that the primary lesson of the previous decade’s wars was that for all of the US’s military power, its ability to control the outcome of events in the region was limited (“Remarks by President Obama,” 2013; Simon, 2007).

The Obama administration’s political engagement in Baghdad during Iraq’s 2010 election cycle and the subsequent failed negotiations for a new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) left the impression that
Obama’s priority was withdrawing US forces rather than maintaining US strategic leverage in the region (Hill, 2014; Jeffrey, 2014). The US conduct toward the Mubarak regime during the 2011 uprising in Egypt sowed further doubt about the US commitment to its partners. After seventeen days of mass protests, the Obama administration concluded that the rule by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak could not survive, and withdrew its support for his regime. Obama’s decision to side with the protesters against Mubarak was made “remarkably quickly,” according to Marc Lynch, who explained that Obama believed siding with the protesters would improve America’s image with the Arab public and place the US on “the right side of history” (Lynch, 2011). The region took note of the speed with which the US abandoned a core regional ally of more than thirty years.

In the case of Libya in 2011, the Obama administration ultimately conducted the kind of military intervention that it professed to eschew, a swift-regime change (even if unintended) without any means for stabilizing and influencing governance in the aftermath (Chollet & Fishman, 2015; Kuperman, 2015; St John, 2016). This created mistrust among both rivals and allies. Russia viewed the US and NATO as exceeding the mandate that Russia supported in UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized the use of force in Libya to protect civilian protesters from attack by the Qaddafi regime’s military forces. On the other hand, the US adopted the approach of “leading from behind” (Hachigian & Shorr, 2013), which demanded that NATO allies assume responsibility for the conflict, a burden for which, militarily, they were not fully equipped (Barry, 2011). The US withdrew its forces from a direct combat role on April 4, 2011, approximately 3 weeks after the operation began (March 19-20). And while the US continued to play a vital role in supporting the operation with logistics, munitions, and intelligence, UK and French forces took the NATO lead in backing the rebel army that defeated Qaddafi’s regime on August 20. Following the fall of Qaddafi’s regime, the US ceded responsibility for the transition to the United Nations, and the assassination of US Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens by Ansar al-Shari’a on September 11, 2012 succeeded in deterring the US from taking a more prominent role in brokering a successful transition in Libya (Wehrey, 2018).

The Syrian Tipping Point, 2011-2013
If these episodes planted the seeds of doubt in the region about the US resolve to remain engaged in the Middle East, the tipping point was the US approach to the Syrian civil war between 2011 and 2014. In August 2011, President Obama called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down, but did nothing to make it happen. In August 2012, Obama declared “a red line,” which was intended to deter the Assad regime from using chemical weapons against the Syrian opposition. However, a year later, in August/September 2013, the Obama administration opted not to enforce it, instead making a deal with Russia that was supposed to destroy the Assad regime’s stockpile of chemical weapons (Goldberg, 2016). The administration’s half-hearted efforts to arm the opposition in 2012 and 2013 led to the better armed and better financed Salafi-jihadi militias cannibalizing the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Weiss, 2014). Administration officials privately conceded that the lackluster effort to arm the opposition was intended as much “to assuage allies who thought the US wasn’t engaged,” as they were to help the rebels (Entous & Gorman, 2013).

The decade-long war has killed more than 600,000 people; it has created more than five and a half million refugees dispersed across the Middle East and Europe; and internally displaced more than half the Syrian population. In 2012 and early 2013, the Obama administration considered a full range of options in Syria. These included “a US-enforced no-fly and buffer zones, regime change by force (facilitated by far more substantial American
and allied military assistance to anti-Assad rebels), and limited retaliatory air strikes against the regime in response to its use of chemical weapons” (Simon & Stevenson, 2015). Ultimately, the administration decided against all of these options because it was concerned that US intervention would bring it into direct conflict with Iran in Syria, and forestall the possibility of engaging Iran diplomatically on its nuclear program (Simon & Stevenson, 2015). In a January 2014 interview, Obama explained that “at the core of his thinking” was the idea that US military involvement could not be the primary instrument for bringing about a “new equilibrium” between Iran and the Sunni Gulf states and Israel that the region “so desperately needed” (Remnick, 2014).

Obama’s reluctance to directly intervene in Syria was regarded by administration officials as a policy “correction” rather than as an indication of American withdrawal. The US was restoring stability by exercising a policy of restraint rather than one of aggressiveness, according to Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, two former Obama officials (Simon & Stevenson, 2015). In the Middle East, the Saudis, who had done everything they could to incentivize, cajole, and goad the US into intervening in Syria, referred to the American restraint as a strategic “disaster” (Obaid, 2016a), because they viewed a new equilibrium with Iran as an unfavorable revision to the regional status quo. Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jasim al-Thani argued in April 2013 that the “United States has to do more” in Syria, adding, “I believe that if we stopped this one year ago, we will not see the bad people you are talking about” (“US Wary as Qatar Ramps Up,” 2013).

Russia Rescues Obama’s Red Line, 2013

The Syrian civil war paved the way for Russia’s return to the Middle East. More generally, the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East presented a strategic challenge for Russia, which viewed the Middle East as a neighboring region. There were four factors that shaped how Russia responded to the Arab Spring. First, Russia feared the Arab Spring uprisings were a continuation of the “color revolutions” in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004-5), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), where popular protests overthrew sitting governments. The Kremlin viewed the West as encouraging and supporting the protesters in the Middle East. Russia believed the West was eager to see vulnerable, authoritarian regimes replaced by Western-style democracies that would more closely align themselves with the US and Europe. Second, there was some concern that the Arab Spring would fuel the West’s appetite for supporting NGOs that sought to promote democracy in Russia. Indeed, the mass protests in Moscow during the winter of 2011-2012 seemed to reinforce that perception. Third, Russia’s Middle East area experts were skeptical that the Arab uprisings would lead to the democratic transitions that the West was encouraging. They viewed the most likely outcome to be an “Islamist Winter” that would lead to chaos, empowering the most radical forces in the region. Finally, Russia did not want to see the West (the US and NATO) return to unilateral action in the region, as was their wont almost a decade earlier in Iraq (Trenin, 2017; Zvyagelskaya, 2013).

The Libya uprising was a test case for Russia. Moscow believed it could work with the West through the UN to manage the crisis in Libya. When the UN-authorized no-fly zone turned into a NATO operation in support of regime change, Putin believed the US, and NATO took advantage of the tacit support Russia had implicitly lent UNSCR 1793 by abstaining from the vote. While Russia lost $4 billion in potential arms sales to the Qaddafi regime, as well as at least $3 billion in strategic oil and natural gas investments, what galled Putin was the precedent of using a humanitarian intervention as a pretext for violating state sovereignty and toppling an authoritarian regime (Blank & Saivetz, 2012). When Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012, the Libya experience led him to take a much
tougher approach with the West on the Syria crisis. Russia blocked any draft resolution in the UN that might have served as the basis for foreign intervention in Syria, and, at the same time, began providing the Assad regime with military support to suppress the opposition (Trenin, 2017).

Putin used UN obstruction and limited military intervention during the Syria crisis to demonstrate Russia’s Great Power status in the Middle East. In the initial stage (2011-2013), Russia’s approach in Syria had a symbolic value that transcended the value of its weapons deals with the Assad regime and its access to the naval port at Tartus. Russia’s ability to thwart international action repeatedly against the Assad regime and create the impression that the US was impotent in the face of Assad’s defiance undermined the image of US power and demonstrated the value of Russia’s friendship (Nizameddin, 2013).

On August 21, 2013, the Assad regime used chemical weapons to gas the opposition in Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus. The attack killed 1,400, including more than 400 children. The Obama administration found itself under immense pressure to enforce its red line and attack the Assad regime. On the sidelines of the G20 summit in St. Petersburg in early September, Putin offered the US a deal that would remove Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile in exchange for the US backing down from military strikes against the regime. Obama, who was not convinced of the value of striking the Assad regime, seized the Russian offer. Apart from removing large amounts of chemical weapons from Syria, the deal had three secondary but equally important effects.

First, the deal cemented the impression of many in the region, such as Emir Tamim of Qatar, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, and Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal, that Obama had no appetite for using American military power (Erlanger, 2013; “Turkey’s Erdogan says Assad buying time,” 2013; “HH the Emir’s Address,” 2016; see also “Obama’s Policy in Syria,” 2016). Erdogan referred to the chemical weapons deal with Russia as a “big gaffe”; Tamim suggested the US was not willing to “raise a finger” to enforce its red line; and, Prince Turki suggested “there is an issue of confidence” and credibility with the Obama administration. In September 2013, al-Thawra, the official newspaper of the Assad regime, referred to Obama’s decision not to use force as the beginning of a “historic American retreat” (Bayoumy & Younglai, 2013). Obama, for his part, believed he was accomplishing more by forgoing deterrence for disarmament, but in reality, he did not achieve either (Baker, 2017).

Second, it legitimized Russia’s Great Power status in the Syria conflict, and more broadly in the Middle East, without deterring either Assad or Russia from using chemical weapons in the conflict (Lynch, 2017; Melham, 2017). Third, the September 2013 US-Russian agreement, which eventually became incorporated into UN Security Resolution 2118, provided a condition for using force against the Assad regime if it violated the deal (Lund, 2017): “In the event of non-compliance, including unauthorized transfer, or any use of chemical weapons by anyone in Syria, the UN Security Council should impose measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter” (“Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons,” 2013, emphasis added). Chapter VII permits the international community to authorize the use of sanctions and military force (Charter of the United Nations). Instead, Russia used the agreement with the US and its position in the United Nations to subvert any strong response to the Assad regime’s repeated violations of the deal, which began almost immediately: of the 161 documented chemical attacks between 2012 and 2016, “77 percent occurred after the
passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118, which mandated cessation of use and elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile” (Hersman, 2016). Russia succeeded both in shielding the Assad regime from US military strikes in September 2013, but also used the subsequent UN agreement with the US to undermine international institutional mechanisms that would have facilitated taking stronger action against the Assad regime in the future.¹

Third, the chemical weapons deal demonstrated the value of a partnership with Russia. Russia not only provided weapons to the Assad regime during this period; it provided strategic intelligence, international institutional protection, and vital diplomatic acumen during a crisis with the US that threatened to destroy the regime.

The Islamic State and the US Light Footprint, 2014-2015

In June 2014, the Islamic State (IS) overran the Iraqi military and conquered Mosul, putting pressure on the Obama administration to redeploy the US forces in the region. IS, which led a growing insurgency in Iraq and Syria between 2011 and 2014, shattered the western border of Iraq and the eastern border of Syria, establishing a territorial caliphate on large swathes of Iraqi and Syrian territory. The new sovereign entity controlled territory that made it approximately the size of the United Kingdom, and sought to expand both westward and eastward at the same time. The Obama administration defined its September 2014 strategy for defeating the Islamic State in terms of a counterterrorism mission. It promised to conduct air strikes in Iraq and Syria, work with the Iraqi military forces, increase assistance to the Syrian opposition, and cut off funding and stem the flow of foreign fighters into the region (“Statement by the President on ISIL,” 2014). In practice, the US fought the war against the Islamic State by providing air support and intelligence to its local partners in Iraq and Syria that served as the “boots on the ground.”² The US coalition also contributed valuable Special Forces units to support its local partners on the ground.

In Iraq, the US officially partnered with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)’s Peshmerga in the fight against the Islamic State. However, the US also found itself indirectly providing air cover for the Iraqi Shiite militias al-Hashd al-Sha’bi (Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF), many of which were organized, armed, and trained by Iran (Robinson, 2016; Weiss & Pregent, 2015). In Syria, the US provided air support to the Kurdish People’s Protection Units or Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG), which resisted an Islamic State siege at Kobani in October 2014. This led to a valuable strategic partnership with Syrian Kurds. The YPG ultimately formed the military backbone of the US-organized Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic force that did much of the fighting against the Islamic State in northeastern Syria and in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. The US military’s new approach to fighting the Islamic State became known as “by, with, and through” (“BWT”), which referred to the US partnerships on the ground (Kaplan, 2019).

This approach should be viewed as the US military’s effort to provide the means to achieve Obama’s aim of “rightsizing” the US “footprint” in the region. As a result, it took three and half years for the US-led coalition to reconquer the territory that the Islamic State had claimed for its caliphate in Syria and Iraq, despite the coalition’s overwhelmingly superior military capabilities. Four factors contributed to this outcome: First, the US coalition faced the complexity of identifying and coordinating with competing partners across two different theaters of war. In Iraq, the US fought against the Islamic State through the Iraqi military and the KRG’s independently-commanded Peshmerga forces. In Syria, the US had to bring together the Sunni Arab fighters from the tribes of the Middle Euphrates and the Kurds of the Kobani
and Jazira cantons. Second, the coalition’s reluctance to use its own forces on the ground led to prolonged engagements (in Raqqa and Mosul, for example) and massive collateral damage (Barndollar, 2019). Third, the US fought the Islamic State without fully addressing the preexisting Syrian civil war between the Assad regime and the opposition. Fourth, and relatedly, for many of the parties involved in the fight, defeating the Islamic State was not the top priority. For example, Turkey was more focused on defeating the Assad regime and containing Kurdish autonomy; Russia was more interested in protecting the Assad regime and using the conflict to expand its international and regional influence vis-à-vis the US.

The JCPOA and the Russian/Iranian intervention in Syria, 2015

On November 24, 2013, two months after the US-Russia chemical weapons agreement, the P5+1 signed an interim nuclear agreement with Iran in Geneva, Switzerland. The US and Iran had initiated secret backchannel talks in Oman beginning in March 2013 (preceded by initial contacts in July 2012), and Obama’s reluctance to use force and punish Assad in September 2013 was related to the delicate start of the secret US diplomatic engagement with Iran earlier in the year. The US agreed to isolate the nuclear negotiations from Iran’s regional involvement in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. A period of 20 months of multilateral international negotiations followed, leading to the JCPOA, which was achieved on July 14, 2015. Less than two weeks after the nuclear deal was reached, Qasem Soleimani, Iran’s Quds Force commander, who was responsible for Iranian engagement in Iraq and Syria, traveled to Russia (in violation of Western sanctions) and met with President Putin. During his visit of July 24-26, 2015, Soleimani presented Putin with a plan for military intervention to save a rapidly weakening Assad regime, which for Russia was a means to a greater end (Baev, 2016). Russia’s ultimate aim in Syria has been to force the United States “to deal with Moscow on a more equal footing” (Lukyanov, 2016; see also Baev, 2016; Yaari, 2015); it strives to be a regional “rule-setter,” like the US (Lain & Sutyagin, 2016; see also Mardell, 2016).

The US administration had invested all of its domestic political capital to secure the nuclear deal, and Russia and Iran gambled that the US would not jeopardize the deal over their intervention in Syria.

In September 2015, Russia and Iran launched a massive military intervention to prevent the collapse of the Assad regime, which was steadily losing territory and manpower against the jihadi opposition (Zisser, 2015). Russia’s pretext for the intervention was to provide air support to the regime in its fight against the Islamic State (Williams & Souza, 2016). However, the regime and its partners did not target the Islamic State in Syria; instead, they targeted the Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) alliance and other Syrian opposition groups that were receiving support from the West and were based in areas outside the territory controlled by the Islamic State (Balanche, 2015). In reality, Russia’s goal was to ensure that the Syrian regime was “the only legitimate and viable actor in Syria worth backing” (Kofman, 2015).

The timing of these two events was carefully orchestrated. The Russian/Iranian military intervention did not take place until it became clear that Obama would have enough Congressional support for the JCPOA to avoid a veto (Barmin, 2015). The US administration had invested all of its domestic political capital to secure the nuclear deal, and Russia and Iran gambled that the US would not jeopardize the deal over their intervention in Syria. While the Obama administration viewed the deal as the best available means to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, the region viewed the deal through the prism of the September 2013 US-Russia chemical weapons agreement,
which technically was to have denied the Assad regime its chemical weapons capability, but in practice did not. The chemical weapons deal allowed Obama to retreat from his commitment to enforce his red line, and Jerusalem and Riyadh viewed the JCPOA as the means whereby Obama would avoid a military option to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, but without fully cutting off Iran's access to the nuclear and military technologies necessary to weaponize its nuclear program in the future (“Deficiencies in the Iran Nuclear Deal,” 2015; Morris & Naylor, 2015). More broadly, the Obama administration saw its nuclear diplomacy as a means to reduce US military engagement in the region.

The Obama administration seemed to regard diplomacy and military force as mutually exclusive, rather than mutually reinforcing tools to be used in concert.

In fact, the Obama administration appeared to believe that its 2015 diplomatic breakthrough on a nuclear deal with Iran could serve as a springboard to broker an agreement to end the Syrian civil war. Writing in late 2015, Simon and Stevenson argued that all of the major players in Syria shared a common threat perception regarding the Islamic State, which could serve as the basis for a political agreement to end the civil war and “validate the rapprochement with Iran” (Simon & Stevenson, 2015). This seems like a leap of faith given the Iranian-Russian military intervention launched in Syria in September 2015, which followed Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. Iran and Russia seemed to view their intervention as a means to preserve their gains in Syria and deter any possibility that the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State would expand its mission to include the Assad regime, rather than a gambit to improve their position for a potential negotiation with the US, which they recognized would “restore much of the American prestige that has waned in the region” (Simon & Stevenson, 2015).

The Obama administration seemed to regard diplomacy and military force as mutually exclusive, rather than mutually reinforcing tools to be used in concert. Derek Chollet (2016) appears to have identified the crux of the issue when he wrote in his book The Long Game, “When comparing Russia’s recent behavior in Ukraine and Syria alongside the US approach, one sees two starkly contrasting approaches to wielding influence—and very different approaches to what it means to be ‘strong.’” In Syria, Russia combined diplomatic power (between 2011 and 2013) with limited military intervention (2015) to protect the Assad regime and advance Russian interests. The Obama administration, in contrast, was privileging diplomacy over military force in principle, and thus reducing the political leverage available to the US, given the broad range of its military power.

The Middle East Tries “Self-Help,” 2015-2020

The US 2015 National Security Strategy argued that the US aim of bringing long-term stability to the Middle East depended on “partners who can defend themselves.” Indeed, the Obama “Responsibility Doctrine,” rooted in the belief that US partners needed to do more to protect themselves, was a consistent theme of the administration’s approach to the region (Hachigian & Shorr, 2013). It was one that was reaffirmed, albeit in a very different manner and style, by the Trump administration’s transactional approach to America’s longstanding global security commitments. Both Presidents tended to view the US security partnerships in the Middle East as economic burdens and strategic liabilities rather than as tools that helped the US control risk, exert influence, and enjoy the rewards of a US-led international order (Schroeder, 1975).

The decisive evidence that US partners in the region internalized the American emphasis on self-help can be seen in their efforts since 2015 to project power beyond their borders. It is no
coincidence that these efforts have unfolded in Syria/Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, three regional theaters of war in which the US effort to exercise restraint has not led to stability, but instead contributed to prolonged war and a security vacuum.

Perhaps the most salient feature of this trend toward security self-help—with the exception of the Israeli-Iranian conflict in Syria—has been that many US regional partners now find themselves on opposite sides of these conflicts:

a. At the end of March 2015, Saudi King Salman and his ambitious son, Prince Mohammed, launched a war to roll back the Houthi coup d'état in Yemen, which was viewed by the Saudis as backed by Iran (Khashoggi, 2015). The war has turned into a quagmire for Saudi Arabia and a humanitarian disaster for Yemen (Clausen, 2019). It has not prevented Iran from using the Houthis against the Saudis in northern Yemen, much as Iran has used Hezbollah against Israel in southern Lebanon (Knights, 2018).

b. In August 2016, following a domestic war against the PKK in southeastern Turkey in 2015, Erdogan launched Operation Euphrates Shield, sending the Turkish military into northwest Syria to block the expansion of Kurdish territorial autonomy from northeastern Syria toward the Mediterranean Sea.

c. Between 2017 and 2019, the United Arab Emirates was responsible for backing the emergence and ultimate drive of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) toward separatism in southern Yemen, creating “a civil war within a civil war,” and leading to conflicting agendas between the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Yemen (Hubbard & al-Batati, 2019; Juneau, 2020; Lackner, 2020; Mukhashaf, 2019; “South Yemen in Tumult,” 2020).

d. In January 2018, Turkey launched Operation Olive Branch, again sending Turkish forces across the border, this time to drive the Kurds out of the Kurdish majority Afrin district of far northwest Syria (Gurcan, 2019). This operation drove Kurds from their homes and led to the resettlement of Turkish-backed Sunni Arab rebels in Afrin (Van Wilgenberg & Holmes, 2019).

e. In October 2019, the US permitted Turkey to launch its Operation Peace Spring, (“Donald Trump Gives the Green Light,” 2019; Williams, 2020) which has effectively destroyed Kurdish autonomy in northeast Syria and led to the Turkish occupation of northeastern Syria (Testekin, 2020). The Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria was one byproduct of the Syrian Kurds’ partnership with the United States in the war against the Islamic State in Syria (Ignatius, 2019; Kanat & Banno, 2018; Sly, Dadouch, & Khattab, 2019). Turkey, a US NATO ally, repeatedly denounced the US partnership with the YPG, which was a product of the US’s new “by, with, and through” approach to war in the region (“Erdogan Urges US to Ensure Withdrawal,” 2019; Kingsley, 2019; “Turkey Will ‘Walk into’ Manbij,” 2018). The upshot of Turkey’s incursions into Syria was that US forces have repeatedly faced challenges to their presence in Syria that created the circumstances for direct or indirect armed conflict between US and Turkey, two NATO allies.

f. In 2019, Israel is believed to have expanded its “campaign between wars” against Iran from Syria into Iraq (Yadlin & Heistein, 2019a). There have been consistent reports of Israeli military strikes against Iranian supplied military sites throughout Iraq (Ahronheim, 2019; Yadlin & Heistein, 2019b). These attacks are a response to the Iranian effort to supply Hezbollah with precision missiles and create “a corridor of influence” that extends from Tehran across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon (Adesik, McMaster, & Taleblu, 2019). The increased Israeli military activity should be seen as part of a broad response to the US desire to withdraw from its post-Islamic State military commitments in Syria and Iraq.
The core argument presented here is that the attitudes and actions of the Obama and Trump administrations toward using force and diplomacy in the Middle East were interpreted as a mechanism to wind down and minimize US military engagement in the Middle East, representing a break from the post-WWII history of the US attempting to manage the security affairs of the region through an architecture of regional partnerships.

The Obama administration’s “geopolitical equilibrium” and “strategic patience” were euphemisms employed to signal its intention to reduce and revise the nature of US security commitments in the Middle East. Obama’s reference to creating a “geopolitical equilibrium” between Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East was his way of signaling that he did not believe it was in US interests to use American military power to protect Saudi Arabia from Iran. “Strategic patience” was also used as a euphemism to justify the US reluctance to confront the Assad regime in Syria (“US National Security Strategy,” 2015).

During the Trump presidency, the US continued to encourage more security self-help in the region, which resulted in the Saudis and the UAE unsuccessfully imposing a blockade on Qatar. This dispute is a subset of a broader intra-Sunni feud between pro- and anti-Muslim Brotherhood camps represented by Qatar and Turkey on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia/UAE/Egypt on the other hand. All of these regional parties are traditional US security partners, with whom the US presumably possesses some degree of political leverage.

Further, the Trump presidency continued the Obama administration’s posture of restraint by demonstrating to the Saudis that the US would not use its military power to respond to Iran’s September 14, 2019 cruise missile and drone attack on Saudi oil infrastructure at Biqayq and Khurais. Even the Trump administration’s abrupt decision to kill Iranian Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani in January 2020—which sent shockwaves through the region and crippled Iran’s effort to project its power into Iraq and Syria—has not changed the widespread perception that the US seeks to disengage from Iraq and Syria—has not changed the widespread perception that the US seeks to disengage from the region (“In Light of the Expected American Withdrawal,” 2020). The new US administration will be judged not on the array of military power that it bases in the Middle East but rather on how


g. In Libya, Turkey’s 2020 military intervention swung the civil war in favor of the Tripoli UN-backed government (Walsh, 2020), but it prompted greater counter-intervention from Russia and the UAE, which have provided key support to Khalifa Haftar since 2014, along with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in opposition to Tripoli in the civil war (Eljarh, 2020; Megerisi, 2019).

h. Since its intervention in Libya, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates have repeatedly violated the 2011 United Nations arms embargo on Libya in 2020, fueling a dangerous arms race on opposing sides in the civil war, despite signs of a permanent ceasefire agreement (October 23, 2020) (“Fleshing out the Libya Ceasefire Agreement,” 2020; Michaelson, 2020; Walsh, 2020).

These are just a few of the examples over the last decade that one might examine. The securitization of the Horn of Africa could also be included. In practice, US partners and adversaries in the Middle East alike have interpreted US military restraint and US encouragement to security self-help as a vacuum. The core argument presented here is that the attitudes and actions of the Obama and Trump administrations toward using force and diplomacy in the Middle East were interpreted as a mechanism to wind down and minimize US military engagement in the Middle East, representing a break from the post-WWII history of the US attempting to manage the security affairs of the region through an architecture of regional partnerships.
it uses it. Force and diplomacy are not mutually exclusive alternatives, but two sides of the same coin that have historically complemented and reinforced one another in the US approach to its allies and adversaries in the region.

Whither the Biden Administration?
The region will assess the Biden administration’s commitment to the Middle East in the same way it took stock of its predecessors in office: by measuring the consonance between its rhetoric and its actions. The new administration also faces the challenge of distinguishing its views and approach to the region from those of the Obama administration, in which Biden and his team played important roles. For example, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan played a role in establishing the diplomatic backchannel to Iran (through Oman) in 2012-2013 that led to the nuclear deal in 2015. Secretary of State Antony Blinken helped plan Obama’s withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq by August 2010. Blinken’s remarks that Biden will place more emphasis on the Indo-Pacific and “as a matter of time allocation and budget priorities, I think we would be doing less not more in the Middle East” (Mead, 2020), made at a July 2020 campaign event, will only strengthen the perception in the region that the US disengagement from the Middle East has become a feature and not a quirk of American policy.

Sullivan co-authored a May 2020 essay in Foreign Affairs with Daniel Benaim, a former foreign policy speechwriter for Biden and member of the US State Department Policy Planning Staff, titled, “America’s Opportunity in the Middle East.” The essay returns to many of the same themes used to support the Obama administration’s approach in the Middle East. The authors argue, “The United States has repeatedly tried using military means to produce unachievable outcomes in the Middle East. Now it’s time to try using aggressive diplomacy to produce more sustainable results.” At the same time, the article makes it clear the US will be reducing its military presence in the region. The authors refer to the tension between these two goals as “threading the needle,” or “how best to square diplomatic ambition with the desire to lessen the US military footprint.” The key to threading the needle, they argue, is “finding a more constructive approach with Iran,” which is essential to the sustainable redeployment of US forces from the region (Sullivan & Benaim, 2020). They contend this could be achieved by restoring nuclear diplomacy; lowering regional tensions; and establishing American-led “structured regional dialogue,” principally between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is clear that Sullivan and Benaim envision a reduced US military presence in the Middle East, which will be commensurate with a policy based on minimizing the need for US military action.
in Syria (Byman, 2017). Four years later, it is reasonable to expect regional leaders will test Biden as well.

Such tests are likely to occur in parallel to renewed US engagement with Iran. The administration's credibility as a diplomatic broker will depend on its ability to convince both its adversaries and partners that it is still willing to use military force in combination with diplomacy, directly or in support of its partners when its presence and influence in the region is challenged. Iran will test US forces in Iraq and Syria; and, Russia, the Assad regime, Iran, and Turkey are all likely to test the US presence in Syria, particularly US support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF); Turkey may also use a show of force to test US partners in the Eastern Mediterranean and northeastern Syria. How the US responds to these tests may play a decisive role in determining whether the Biden administration will be given the chance to “thread the needle” in the Middle East. If the new administration is not willing or able to demonstrate a credible military deterrent alongside its ambitious diplomatic agenda, the regional perception of US withdrawal will no longer be a paradox; it will simply become a reality.

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Notes

1 In 2017, Russia vetoed renewing the joint UN-OPCW investigative mechanism established by UNSCRs 2235 (2015) and 2319 (2016). See also Hart (2018), Deutsch (2018), and Becker-Yakob (2019).

2 The key operational phrase for the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), which was established in October 2014, was “in conjunction with partner forces.” The global coalition against the Islamic State ultimately included 81 countries.
China’s Evolving Approach to the Middle East: A Decade of Change

Gedaliah Afterman

As a global superpower, China’s engagement in the Middle East has become increasingly important for the region and beyond. China’s relations in the Middle East under President Xi Jinping have been pragmatic and trade-oriented. Although the energy sector remains the most important area of cooperation, Beijing has expanded its reach over the last decade, and the region has become a growing market for Chinese products, including affordable consumer goods, technology, and services. The Belt and Road Initiative, large investments in megaprojects, and focus on the Digital Silk Road have helped Beijing position itself as a material actor in the region. As superpower competition escalates, countries in the middle, such as Israel, cannot afford to make mistakes, and thus require a long-term, informed strategy. While to date Beijing has successfully balanced its relations with all sides in the region, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, these relations do not come without risks and costs. Understanding China’s engagement in the region, especially in light of the intensifying superpower competition and the changes in the Middle East, is imperative.

Keywords: China-Israel relations, China-Middle East, Arab Spring, Digital Silk Road, Iran
In a speech to Arab leaders while visiting the Middle East in 2014, Foreign Minister Wang Yi promised that China would contribute its share to regional peace and stability. Seven years later, many are still trying to grasp what China has brought to the region, what it intends to bring, and how this engagement might shape the region’s future. As China’s position as a global power has become evident, its engagement in the Middle East has become more important for the region and beyond. Assessing Beijing’s evolving perceptions and policies toward the Middle East is essential for envisioning the region’s future. Countries and leaders that understand China’s long-term interests and the opportunities and challenges those interests might bring to the region can devise long-term policies accordingly and will be significantly better prepared for the future. As great power competition intensifies, Israel must include China as an important element in its strategic thinking in general and regarding the Middle East in particular.

Overview
Chinese influence in the Middle East has become a topic of growing importance. Until 2010, Beijing’s policy vis-à-vis the Middle East was extremely cautious and narrow in scope. It perceived the region (“West Asia,” as it is known in Chinese policy circles) as peripheral and a “US domain.” China maintained growing economic ties with all Middle East countries, focused primarily on oil and gas imports.

China has traditionally supported the Palestinians and continues to vote against Israel in the UN, especially on Israeli-Palestinian issues. This today seems to be more due to bloc politics and rhetoric than a principled position. Beijing’s regional balancing game and “everyone’s friend” policy, coupled with both a reluctance to play a more prominent role in regional politics and a consistent opposition with Russia to “foreign interference” in Syria and elsewhere have, so far, proven effective. However, it may become more challenging for China to maintain this balance as it grows more powerful in the region and beyond.

Beijing’s “balancing act” of maintaining relationships with all sides of multiple conflicts in the region has forced it to maneuver carefully. The dominant role traditionally played by the United States has, until recently, not left much space for other parties to engage with the region. American and other Western perceptions of China’s presence in the region have shifted from seeing China as benign, if not very helpful—with US President Obama in 2016 describing China as a “free rider”—to a growing perception that China constitutes a threat. China overtook the US as Saudi Arabia’s leading oil export market for the first time in 2009, and the sense that China seeks to gradually fill the void left by the shrinking US footprint in the region has only grown since.

China’s Evolving Engagement in the Middle East
Under President Xi Jinping, China’s engagement in the Middle East has been pragmatic and trade-oriented. From the early 1990s, China built relationships in the region to satisfy its demand for petrochemicals, needed for domestic economic expansion, but that dynamic has expanded considerably over the last decade. China is now a significant trading partner for most countries in the Middle East and, as the largest investor in the region, holds substantial geo-economic interests. Building on its traditional connections, China understands that it has much to offer its Middle East partners. So far, it is adopting a “give less, gain more” approach, especially toward countries heavily dependent on it, like Iran. For their part, Middle East leaders view Beijing as a reliable partner. As European and US imports of crude oil are slowly declining, China has widened its influence and investments in the region. Beijing’s State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) can not only provide large investments; they are also more risk-tolerant and are willing to incur lower profits to secure deals than their Western, private peers.
China has become the world’s second-largest consumer of crude oil, the Arab League’s largest trading partner, and Iran’s top export partner. The Middle East provides almost half of China’s oil and natural gas. Although the energy sector remains the most important area of cooperation with the Middle East, Beijing has expanded its reach over the last decade and has become a growing market for its products, such as affordable consumer goods, technology, and services. As the current consumption-production gaps with most states have posed a challenge to relations, Beijing is ramping up its efforts to increase mutual benefits and broaden its relationships with countries in the region.

President Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to connect 65 percent of the world’s population and position China at the center of global trade networks, exemplifies Beijing’s understanding that trade and influence are deeply connected. Its reinvention of the ancient Silk Road has increased its involvement in regional infrastructure projects. These include the high-speed China-Iran railway plan; the Haramain High-Speed Rail Project, linking Makkah and Medina, announced in 2009; and its investment agreement with the operator of the Hamad Port in Qatar. China has recently become the largest investor in Egypt’s megaproject to develop the Suez Canal, and is involved in several substantial infrastructure developments in Israel, such as the new Tel Aviv Light Rail, the Carmel Tunnels, and projects in both the Haifa and Ashdod Ports.

China is likely to play a key role in a reinstated Iran nuclear agreement following a possible return of the Biden administration to the JCPOA.

While Beijing’s dependence on major energy and resources providers have traditionally shaped its position in the region, the BRI and China’s growing focus on technology and trade are already changing the nature of its regional involvement. These developments are likely to have a long-term impact on the region.

Diversification and Interdependencies

Like many other countries that are highly dependent on exporting their local natural and energy resources, Middle East countries are at risk of suffering from the Dutch disease. They are under pressure to diversify their economies, especially since under the Obama administration the US dramatically reduced its dependence on foreign oil imports. While Saudi Arabia and China’s positive trade balance has strengthened bilateral relations, other Middle East states have struggled to create interdependencies other than those based on energy exports. Energy will most likely remain the central pillar of trade between China and the Middle East in the near future, but the importance of other sectors, such as technology, is growing significantly.

In 2016, Xi Jinping conducted his first official visit to the Middle East since becoming Secretary-General of the Chinese Communist Party four years earlier. His visit included stops in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. As tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to escalate, Chinese policy aims to demonstrate neutrality and enable continued trade with both sides. Beijing has already demonstrated its ability to engage in regional matters, particularly in the Iran nuclear talks under the P5+1 framework, which led to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. China is likely to play a key role in a reinstated Iran nuclear agreement following a possible return of the Biden administration to the JCPOA, after President Trump abandoned it in May 2018. In a rapidly evolving Middle East, avoiding entanglement in regional conflicts seems increasingly important for the future of China’s engagement in the region.

China has been watching and learning from the US experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, and has taken a consistent non-interference approach.
to Syria and other trouble spots. Instead, it focuses its efforts on trade and investment. Regional trade initiatives such as the free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have stalled due to disputes within the GCC. Nevertheless, the recent signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement in Asia and the Abraham Accords could bring new momentum to other Asia-Middle East trade frameworks, including Israel.

China’s relations with Iran, traditionally based on oil and gas exports, have shifted in recent years. After economic sanctions limited access to European imports, Iran became a growing market for Chinese goods. Cheaper, often lower quality products from China are now widely available in Iran. Beijing has also ramped up its presence in Iran’s infrastructure sector through projects like Tehran’s metro system and the Sadr expressway expansion. Strategically Beijing has viewed Iran as an important gateway between Central Asia and the Middle East. China also views its relations with Iran through the prism of China-US relations, using it as a strategic foothold within a US-dominated region.

As it became more economically powerful over the last decade, China realized that Iran needs it much more than it needs Iran. While both sides are discussing plans for a 25-year “strategic partnership,” those plans have so far not been realized. China clearly sees some economic and strategic value in this framework, especially as its rivalry with the US intensifies. However, it is unclear to what extent China will seek to follow through on it. With US sanctions on trade with Iran adding more obstacles, and Saudi Arabia and others watching closely, it seems that China has in recent years been gradually turning away from Iran to focus on other energy providers in the region, which are less risky and offer easier cooperation.

Indeed, the Saudi engagement with China goes in both directions, with Riyadh making long-term investments in China’s energy infrastructure. In 2019, Saudi Aramco, the kingdom’s largest oil company, established a number of joint ventures with leading Chinese SOEs, which include investment in several Chinese refining and petrochemicals complexes. The ventures signal security for China’s oil demand from its largest crude oil supplier and have deepened their relationship. The kingdom’s Vision 2030, unveiled in 2016, is an ambitious plan to diversify its economy and reduce reliance on oil, and by and large, the project complements Beijing’s BRI. The annual China-Saudi Arabia High-Level Joint Committee established in 2019 is a major platform for the two countries to coordinate their policies and initiatives.

Finally, Egypt, serving as a gateway to North Africa, has become an important partner for Beijing due to its large population and its strategic role in the Arab League and the region. Over the last decade, it has also become a growing consumer market for Chinese products. In 2011, China’s exports to Egypt surpassed those from the US for the first time, reaching a high of $12.3 billion in 2018. More recently, ZhenHua Oil Co, a large Chinese SOE, has secured multibillion dollar deals with Iraqi oil producers, struggling from the decreasing oil demand due to COVID-19. By offering large pre-payment deals, China has secured its oil demand from Iraq and has locked in relations with it for the next five years.

The Digital Silk Road and Technology

China’s Digital Silk Road, introduced in 2015, has become a substantial part of its engagement in the region, with Middle East countries growing into an important market for Chinese technology and investment. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE have expanded technological cooperation with China in recent years and have profited significantly from China’s cutting-edge technologies. China has positioned itself and its “Silicon
Sino-Israeli cooperation has been established in several fields, ranging from technology and agriculture to cultural and educational exchanges. While China carefully considers the Palestinian cause in its relations with Arab states, it has shown a growing interest in ties with Israeli companies.

Government initiatives across the region, such as Smart Dubai 2012, Saudi Arabia’s National Transformation Program 2030, and China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone, rely on Chinese engagement and technology. Not only can China offer cutting-edge technology; it is also more comfortable with private sector-led growth than its American counterparts. Additionally, Chinese tech giants often have more experience in the logistical challenges of developing countries. While China’s technology companies, such as Huawei, are experiencing significant challenges in other parts of the world, its cooperation with the Middle East is deepening. A sizable number of 5G network contracts have been awarded to Huawei and ZTE, and projects such as Huawei’s first cloud platform in the Middle East will be launched in Cairo.

Chinese interest in Israel has increased substantially over the last few years. Venture capital and private equity deals have been grown in size and number, with investments reaching a high of $325 million in 2018. Sino-Israeli cooperation has been established in several fields, ranging from technology and agriculture to cultural and educational exchanges. While China carefully considers the importance of the Palestinian cause for its relations with Arab states, it has shown a growing interest in developing ties with Israeli companies. Israeli technology in particular has attracted the interest of Chinese investors, both financial and strategic, as part of China’s drive for technological self-reliance. As the US push toward economic and technological decoupling from China intensified, so did its concerns and pressure to limit Israeli-Chinese engagement. Israel must be careful not to lose its independence or damage its relations with the US. The Israeli government should put in place proper guidelines and mechanisms to help manage the economic and diplomatic complexities that are likely to persist.

China’s Response to the Arab Spring
The events of the Arab Spring had a significant impact on Beijing, both in terms of concerns for its own domestic stability and its approach toward the Middle East. Just as with the fall of the Eastern bloc in the late 80s, the events of that Arab Spring reaffirmed the fears of domestic instability and even of internal uprisings within China. These fears led to enhanced repression of oppositional domestic voices. Controlled media coverage referred to the events as “Arab turmoil,” “Egypt,” “Cairo,” and “jasmine,” and focused on the scope of economic disruption and disorder caused by the uprisings.

Internal repressions ranged from high-level security efforts nationwide in cyberspace and restrictions of public gatherings, to the introduction of the State Internet Information Office (SIIO) in 2011, tasked with supervising Chinese netizens’ content by monitoring and blocking social media platforms. This shift from “selective tolerance” in cyberspace to tightened internet surveillance can be seen as a result of the Arab Spring—China has watched the Middle East closely and has learned its lesson for maintaining stability at home.

On the regional front, China remained passive throughout the developments in Tunisia, mostly due to limited economic interest and...
significance. At the same time, it emphasizes its unwillingness to engage in traditional diplomatic terms in this volatile region. Despite Egypt’s higher economic importance for China and its shock at the removal of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, its response remained cautious and focused on quiet dialogue rather than interference.

China’s reaction to developments in Libya, which spiraled into a civil war and humanitarian crisis, was different. Muammar Qaddafi’s reference to China’s response to the Tiananmen Square events, and even more important, domestic pressure for ensuring the safety of 35,000 Chinese citizens in the conflict zone put China’s non-interference policy to the test. Beijing’s belated yet symbolic decision to send its navy to rescue its citizens and its reluctant support of UN Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973, which authorized military intervention in Libya, underline a significant shift in direction.

The Middle East: Between Instability and Opportunity

The experience of the Arab Spring, the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the rise of al-Qaeda and ISIS have significantly shaped the Chinese perception of the Middle East and increased its concerns regarding regional stability. The Arab Spring caught Chinese decision makers by surprise and forced them to question many of their assumptions regarding the region. As a result, Beijing decided to take a more proactive approach. Betting (but no longer relying) on the autocratic regimes’ return to power, China focused on gaining more control.

Depending on a secure energy supply to ensure its ongoing rapid economic growth, following the Arab Spring, China introduced a new strategy in the region, focusing on safeguarding its energy demand by encouraging stability through development rather than interference. The eventual failure of the Arab Spring and lessons from the prolonged and costly US interference in the region have reinforced the sense in Beijing that its path, focused on neutrality, dependencies, and interdependencies, is the correct one.

While China’s approach to the Middle East has so far been quite effective, it does not seek to replace the United States in the region, at least not yet. To be sure, its current partnership agreements with at least 15 Middle East countries are viewed with increasing suspicion by the US. Beijing has consistently criticized US failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria and the toll that these have taken on the region, but also realizes the benefits it gains from the US presence. China outlined its approach toward the Middle East in its 2016 Arab Policy Paper, which describes relationships focused on economy and trade, energy, education, and investment, but barely touches on security. It outlines China’s five basic principles for relations with Arab countries: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. Even though China seeks to smooth relations by outlining its intentions not to interfere with US security positions in the region, competition in other areas, such as technology and trade, are creating friction. The ability of both China and the US to balance their relations and competing interests in the region will continue to be a guiding principle in every one of China’s steps.

A Region of Growing Importance: Looking Ahead

The Middle East will continue to be an important source for supplying China’s growing energy demands. Indeed, the region’s central role in the BRI, its growing focus on technology (both as innovators and clients), and China’s growing tensions with the US (and increasingly with Europe and others in the West) mean that Beijing is likely to become even more active in the region.

Beijing’s first military base overseas in Djibouti, which was completed in 2017, increases its influence on crucial maritime crossings such as the Strait of Hormuz. Its growing involvement
Israel must closely monitor the regional developments and understand the inherent risks and opportunities, especially in light of the growing tension between the superpowers.

Middle East mostly in a positive light by both the authorities and the media. The UAE was the first to approve one of the Chinese vaccines in September 2020, while Egyptian and Saudi officials have heralded China as their main model for dealing with the virus.

China has so far been quite successful in using COVID-19 to solidify its economic and strategic influence in the Middle East, including in its growing engagement with energy markets such as Iraq. This is also reflected in other areas, such as the deployment of the (5G) cellular communications network, infrastructure tenders, and even the sale of military equipment, where Western companies are losing out to their Chinese counterparts.

While the US is fighting for its place as a world leader and European countries are preoccupied with domestic challenges, China continues to strengthen its regional position, including vis-à-vis important Washington allies such as Saudi Arabia. Israel must closely monitor these regional developments and understand the inherent risks and opportunities, especially in light of the growing tension between the superpowers.

Beijing’s effort to keep all sides happy and maximize its gains while avoiding the region’s many pitfalls have so far paid off, at least economically. Many countries in the region view China as an important partner and believe that (perhaps unlike Russia) it is here to stay as a major power for the long term. At the same time, China is likely to remain cautious as it assesses the policies of the new US administration and the consequences of the current paradigm shift in the region following the signing of the Abraham Accords. China’s response to the agreements, which caught it by surprise, has been muted to date.

China seems to be assessing the long-term consequences of these developments. Its main concerns seem to focus on what the agreements could mean to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and regional stability as a whole. Most significantly, it seems to be evaluating what could be the implications for Iran, and whether or not this signals a United States resurgence in the region. Beijing-based decision makers initially viewed the Abraham Accords as having the Trump administration’s short-term political interests in mind, rather than that of the region, but the US election results, and particularly a potential US return to the Iran nuclear agreement is likely to put China much more at ease.

While countries like Saudi Arabia, rich in resources, can perhaps be more comfortable in their relationship with both China and the US, others must navigate the minefield carefully. As a small country maneuvering between the powers, Israel cannot afford to make mistakes, and requires a long term and well thought out strategy. Its guiding principle should be preserving the strong and crucial bond with the US, while developing a fruitful trading relationship with China in non-sensitive areas. One element of this long term approach should be creating a potent foreign investment review mechanism, one that would seek to balance the pressures of superpower competition with Israel’s own national and economic interests.

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Roundtable: Israel and the Middle East, One Decade after the Arab Upheaval

Carmit Valensi

This special issue of *Strategic Assessment* examines various aspects of the upheaval that erupted in the Middle East a decade ago. The roundtable summarized below sought to focus on the impact of the Arab upheaval on Israel, where Israel stands in the regional arena following the upheaval, and the effects on Israel’s strategic, political, and social situation. Participants included scholars and experts from different disciplines, including Middle East studies, political science, security, sociology, and economics.

The roundtable addressed a number of fundamental questions, some of which figure elsewhere in the issue as well. Among these questions are whether Israel is part of the regional system, and if so, what can be learned about Israel from the regional system; to what extent does Israel play an active role in the regional system and the region’s various camps; how is Israel perceived by elements in the Middle East (publics and leaders); and what policy should Israel pursue in the region.

In the past decade, and even before, there has been a tendency to regard Israel as an actor outside the system, because Israelis do not want to identify themselves with the region’s dubious and unsuccessful characteristics.

The symposium was moderated by INSS Deputy Director for Research and Analysis and *Strategic Assessment* Editor-in-Chief Brig. Gen. (ret.) Itai Brun. Participants included Dr. Assaf David, co-founder and academic director of the Forum for Regional Thinking and teaching fellow in the Department of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; former Knesset Member Ksenia Svetlova, a senior
A comparison between the protests actually highlights the differences between them, and between Israel and other countries in the region.

Two of the issues discussed could theoretically help indicate that Israel is indeed part of the regional system, at least to some extent. The first concerns the affinity between the popular protests in the Middle East over the past decade and the wave of protests in Israel. The participants believe, however, that the coincidence of the protests does not show a causal relationship or identical regional characteristics; in their opinion, it results from broader global changes. The participants also found no connection or reference in the protests to suggest they were related to each other. Indeed, some argued that a comparison between the protests actually highlights the differences between them, and between Israel and other countries in the region.

The second issue concerns Israel’s normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan. Despite the widespread assumption that these are an important step in Israel’s drawing closer to the region, the participants believe that they are insufficient for its full integration in the region, as long as there is no real progress on the Palestinian issue.

Is Israel taking an active role in the regional “camps” and the conflicts between them? How should Israeli strategy in the region be characterized? Some of the participants emphasized that Israel was wont to play a passive role in the region by mainly responding to events and in most cases refraining from taking an initiative. The normalization agreements were also described as the result of external initiatives by the Gulf states and the United States, not Israeli activism. At the same time, it was agreed that Israel could potentially be integrated in the region, primarily in the framework of what is emerging as an axis of stable and pragmatic countries eager for regional peace and prosperity.

On the approach of countries in the region toward Israel, participants noted that the upheaval in the Middle East in the past decade has caused countries to focus on their domestic...
problems and internal affairs, with Israel in general and the Palestinian issue in particular playing a much less central role than before the Arab Spring. Israel was formerly perceived in public opinion surveys in the region as the main threat to security, and ranked high on political and public agendas. Since the Arab Spring, however, the main challenges on the regional agenda have been socioeconomic difficulties and unemployment rates, while Israel has ranked much lower. Nevertheless, and despite the relative improvement in Israel’s status, it is clear that even now, and notwithstanding the normalization agreements, there is widespread opposition in Arab public opinion to normalization with Israel, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of Israel as part of the region. The recent agreements, however, are likely to improve Israel’s regional status, provided that the Palestinian issue is not neglected.

Most of the participants are skeptical about the existence of a regional system in the sense of an association of countries with a common history, geographic borders, culture, language, and religion. They recognize—at the state level—the uniqueness of each country and its differences from its neighbors, as well as the existence of an international-global order that affects, and is affected by, the region. They are less convinced of the existence of a regional system with a shared logic and common characteristics.

Another issue that surfaced in the discussion concerns the boundaries of the Middle East space. Interestingly, Iran was almost never mentioned in the discussion, probably out of the belief that it was outside the framework of the discussion and the system, despite its figuring at the core of the regional agenda, and certainly that of Israel.

The discussion concluded with policy recommendations by the participants. Notwithstanding the increasing claim that the Palestinian issue has become less important in the discourse between Israel and other countries in the region, the issue was present throughout the discussion, with repeated assertions that breaking the stalemate is an imperative. It was therefore recommended that real progress be made in the political process. Until that happens, instability will continue to afflict the countries in the region, including Israel, which will be unable to significantly and substantially improve its relations with the Arab world. The second recommendation concerns Israel’s need to improve its relations with the neighboring countries, above all Jordan and Egypt, and to undertake new political initiatives with countries such as Lebanon.

Israel: Part of the Middle East?
The participants were first asked to what extent they classified Israel as part of the Middle East system. What emerged was a clear gap between Israel’s accepted geographical classification and its conceptual classification. Most argued that Israelis tend to regard themselves as external to the region, and do not identify themselves with its various elements. The results of a survey conducted by the Mitvim Institute and presented by Ksenia Svetlova bear out this contention: only 29 percent of Israelis responded that Israel belongs to the Middle East: 25 percent said that Israel is part of the Mediterranean Basin, 24 percent said that Israel belongs more to Europe, and 10 percent answered that they did not know where Israel belongs. Svetlova explained the results by saying, “It is convenient for us to identify ourselves more with Greece and Cyprus than with Syria and a Lebanon dominated by Hezbollah.” On the other hand, according to Assaf David and Anwar Mahajna, Israel is
Most of the participants are skeptical about the existence of a regional system in the sense of an association of countries with a common history, geographic borders, culture, language, and religion.

To Tamar Hermann, the discussion on whether Israel is part of the Middle East began long before the state was established. According to studies she conducted, many Israeli citizens tend to see themselves as part of the region from a cultural standpoint, but an absolute majority has no wish to be integrated in Middle East politics, or to be identified with it. This includes Arabs, Sephardic Jews, and Ashkenazi Jews in Israel. “The average Israeli wants to be somewhere between Vienna and Paris, but to sit on oriental rugs and eat hummus” (Benvenisti, quoted by Hermann).

To Anwar Mahajna, one measure that Israel can take in order to become closer to the region is to refrain from undermining the status of Arabic as a second language. She asserts that this measure will make it possible to grow closer culturally to the region’s populations. Israel should think constructively and actively about how it can be part of the region, beyond the circumstances of its geographical location.

Mahajna also addressed the question of whether Arab citizens of Israel feel that they are part of the region. She said that in the cultural sphere, many Arab artists from Israel have become popular in Arab countries, which has strengthened their regional identity. In addition, when Arab citizens of Israel visit Arab countries, they feel a common identity, language, religion, and history. On the other hand, national unity and Arab identity are in general weaker among Israel’s Arab citizens than among Arabs in other countries in the region, due to the multiple identities of Arabs in Israel and the fact that they live with internal contradictions—civil identity versus religious and cultural identity. “As ostensibly equal citizens, we live in a democratic country (despite the Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People, and so forth); but we do not identify with the symbols of the state and we are culturally repressed. Religiously, there has been disappointment with Islam in the past decade; its popularity has waned.”

Between the Arab Spring and the Israeli Spring

As part of this discussion, the participants considered whether there is a connection between the Arab Spring protests and the protests in Israel and the rest of the world, and whether this indicates that Israel should be identified with the region. Most of the participants feel there is no real connection between the events, and that the changes are of a more global-universal nature than a question of the region’s identity and special characteristics.

Tamar Hermann believes that there is no conscious link, and that the fact that protests coincided does not indicate any causal connection. She also argued that the protests taking place now in Israel are related to events in the Western world, not the Middle East.
Hermann likened the protests to the waves generated by a whale in water—large and intermittent. The protests appear in various places with local groups, and are linked to the spirit of the times, as seen in Japan, Spain, Serbia, Manhattan, and also Israel. In her opinion, the recent attempt to show pictures from Tahrir Square demonstrations in Egypt on a screen on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv in order to connect the events was marginal and unsuccessful. Hermann tied the question of coincidence to doubts about globalization capabilities, and said that the protests in the Middle East, Israel, and the rest of the world are part of a tectonic global process with simultaneous local effects.

Ksenia Svetlova also stated that there was no connection between the Arab Spring events and what happened in Israel. In her opinion, the protest in Israel is of a different type, familiar in democratic countries, including Poland and Hungary. It differs from an attempt to cast off a tyrannical autocratic regime, as occurred in the Middle East. Israel was also mentioned in the protests that took place in Egypt in the context of the peace agreements; the willingness to preserve these agreements was expressed, but Israel was not an integral part of this protest, and was not perceived as part of this issue. Her conclusion is that the Arab Spring events had the effect of alienating Israel from the region, and gave many people in the region the pessimistic sense that Middle East is immune to democracy.

Similarly, Tali Zinger argued that at the outset of the events, there was a feeling that the democratic movement in the region, which empowered and emphasized liberal democratic values, created a common basis for concepts and opinions prevailing in Western countries, and among potential allies like the US and Israel. There was hope that if Google and Facebook were platforms for organizing protests in the Arab world, they were likely to bring Israel and the Arab world closer to each other. In actuality, this did not occur, because this movement was silenced.

The Normalization Agreements
Are they changing the rules of the game? Can they affect the degree to which Israel is associated with the Middle East?

The participants generally agreed that it would be a misnomer to call these agreements peace agreements, because Israel was never at war with the countries with which it is now forging diplomatic relations, in contrast to the state of relations before the peace agreements signed with Egypt and Jordan.

According to Assaf David, previous peace agreements were based on the idea that there was a solution to the Palestinian issue, and that progress in these agreements was predicated on progress in a peace agreement, or at least on an arrangement, with the Palestinians. In his opinion, the new agreements are political-diplomatic agreements between states based on the tacit assumption that there will be no solution to the Palestinian issue. Willingness to sign normalization agreements constitutes recognition that the occupation is permanent. David said, “Israel has bypassed the Palestinians and the Jordanians on its way to the Persian Gulf, thereby creating a regional alliance that is pro-Zionist in the sense advocated by the political right in Israel. In this regard, Israel is integrating into the regional architecture, and mainly in the Gulf architecture—an architecture that sanctifies power, weapons, business, and capitalism.”

Ksenia Svetlova explained that the Abraham Accords originated in the Arab Spring events, the rise of ISIS, and a series of events that shook the foundations of the old order. As a result, Arab countries like the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (meanwhile with the tacit consent of Saudi Arabia) wanted to improve their regional status alongside Israel. These countries fully realize that the United States is withdrawing from the region, and is not expected to return
to it in the near future. She believes that the agreements do not bring Israel closer to the region; they strengthen the position of those who claim, “See, there are Arabs who do not demand territorial concessions from us, and this reinforces the right wing view that there is no need to compromise.”

Udi Dekel linked the Abraham Accords to the Palestinian issue, and argued that the connection with some of the countries in the region makes it possible to deal with the Palestinian issue “from the outside in… First, we will create a regional agreement, and from the regional agreement, we will move on to the bilateral matter between us and the Palestinians, in which we do not know exactly what to do.”

According to Tali Zinger, the normalization agreements are a result of a top-down process, a strategic vision of the leadership, the opposite of the process evident in the Arab Spring, which began as a bottom-up call by the people for freedom and a change in their socioeconomic situation. In effect, a leader’s ability to cancel a basic and comprehensive boycott law enforced against Israel for decades was made possible by the centralized character of the regimes and the social contract in the Gulf states.

**Israel: An Active Player in the Region?**

Is Israel taking an active part in the existing “camps” in the region and in the conflicts between them, and how can Israeli strategy in the region be characterized?

In recent years, Israel has adopted a strategy of accommodation to changes, rather than proactively taking an initiative in which desired end states are defined. In the early stages of the Arab Spring, Israel’s inclination was to “sit on the fence” and watch from the sidelines. Udi Dekel asserted that when immediate, concrete threats emerged, they were dealt with, but not as the result of an organized, well-formed, long-term strategy. Israel’s activism and assertiveness in the past decade were expressed in its determined position that a Palestinian state cannot be established.

Dekel explained this aloofness by saying that an outside perspective led to the formation of the “villa in the jungle” concept. He said, “Ehud Barak was the first to describe it, after which Netanyahu adopted it, arguing that we are surrounded by wild animals, and should therefore construct an iron wall, an iron dome, in order to defend ourselves against the surroundings. We should focus on the villa and develop the villa. What happened? Following the Arab upheaval, we suddenly discovered that the region does not always allow us the luxury of sitting on the fence and enjoying the view, as in the case of Syria.”

According to Dekel, the normalization agreements show that the region has in effect decided to adopt Israel, more than Israel has chosen to adopt it. The agreements resulted from the sense of a shared threat created by the existence of hostile axes in the region: the Iranian-Shiite axis and a new axis led by Turkish President Erdogan, who has “neo-Ottoman” ambitions of regional domination, as well as the jihadi axis, which has been weakened but still exists. Arab countries, especially the Gulf states, have recognized the need to form another axis, composed of stable and pragmatic countries, that can bring prosperity to the region, and where Israel can play a key role. This approach became stronger with the region-wide realization that the United States does not intend to remain in the Middle East forever, and does not intend to fight other people’s wars. Furthermore, the regional initiative was accompanied by a United States initiative, led by the Trump administration, which held that there was a need to construct an alliance of countries under the American umbrella and influence in order to cope with hostile parties (and, according to Kobi Michael, to preserve critical American interests, without the United States having to maintain a substantial military presence in the region). In Dekel’s opinion, Israel also behaved passively in this case, and
became involved through the two initiatives mentioned above.

**How is Israel Perceived in the Middle East?**

The discussion of the extent to which Israel is part of the regional system and its actual role in the regional architecture led to a riveting debate on the question of how Israel is perceived by the inhabitants of the Middle East.

Khader Sawaed said that according to a public opinion survey in the Arab world conducted by Arab Barometer, until a decade ago, Israel was rated as the strongest threat to Arab security. The perception of the threat’s gravity has since declined (51 percent rated Israel as the gravest threat in 2011, compared with 37 percent in 2020). In Saudi Arabia, for example, the percentage of Saudis who regard Israel as a threat fell from 30 percent to 4 percent. In Egypt, on the other hand, a quarter of the public (about 25 million people) still regard Israel as a threat.

At the same time, there is a consensus in the Arab world opposing recognition of Israel (84 percent a decade ago and 88 percent in 2020). According to Sawaed, the anti-Israel attitude is prevalent primarily in the Mashriq region—Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan—and in the Maghreb region (North Africa). This attitude is mainly a result of the perception of Israel as an occupying country, a country with imperialist and revisionist ambitions. On the other hand, the Palestinian issue in particular and the religious explanation were rated very low as explanations of this perception.

Tali Zinger asserts that there has been a reversal and change in the discourse about Israel, from denial of its existence to the exact opposite—support for relations with Israel. Although the change came from above, from the leadership, it is gradually trickling down to the public. The change is a rapid one, but people regard it as authentic. In her frequent visits to the Gulf states over the past decade, Zinger gained the impression that politics and the attitude toward Israel remained outside the discourse. “The very attempt to access a website with an address ending in .co.il inside the United Arab Emirates would have caused a red light to appear on the screen, warning against breaking the rules. Direct telephone calls from Israel were not an option. Even mentioning Israel in the United Arab Emirates would have caused locals and foreigners to move uneasily in their chairs,” she remarked. This assertion resulted mainly from political sensitivity and anti-Israel feelings prevalent among the Palestinian and Lebanese communities in the United Arab Emirates. This sensitivity has waned since the agreements, and one of the most prominent expressions of this is that it is now possible to enter these countries with an Israeli passport. Zinger says that products such as sweet potatoes marked with an Israeli flag can now be seen in the local markets.

**Policy Recommendations for Israel**

Against the backdrop of the changes in the regional system in the past decade, especially those involving the normalization agreements, the participants offered policy proposals and recommendations for Israel. Two recommendations stand out. The first is that the Palestinian issue cannot be ignored, and that as long as no significant change occurs, the countries in the region and Israel will continue to suffer from instability. The second recommendation is that Israel should improve its relations with the neighboring countries, above all Jordan and Egypt. Another recommendation concerns the need to rebuild the Israeli diplomatic corps in order to facilitate judicious and orderly foreign relations.

Tamar Hermann links the normalization agreements to a process that began in the 1950s in the framework of the periphery concept promoted by Ben Gurion, based on the idea of forming closer relations with Sudan, Ethiopia, Turkey, Iran, the Kurds, the Christians in Lebanon, and others. She believes that Israel should disengage from any affiliation...
or preference for any particular political leader, and should realize that today, most people in Israel aspire toward regional calm. For example, in a recent survey conducted by Hermann, 75 percent of respondents believe that the three agreements signed—with Sudan, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates—have improved Israel’s strategic situation. This figure reflects a general preference throughout the Israeli political spectrum.

Resolution of the Palestinian Issue

Anwar Mahajna pointed out the connection between domestic policy and Israel’s foreign policy in the regional context. She asserted that a solution to the conflict with the Palestinians cannot be evaded, and its solution will lead to the substantial integration of Israel in the region and to regional stability because it will be dealing with people, not just governments. Furthermore, Israel should take a number of important measures concerning the Palestinians and its Arab citizens, including repealing the Nation State Law and changing the status of the Arabic language. Udi Dekel stressed that the belief in Israel that the Palestinian issue and the Arab Peace Initiative are no longer relevant is fundamentally mistaken, saying, “Decision makers in Israel must realize that even the regimes that are forming relations with us are unable to ignore the Palestinian problem or take it lightly. A promise should be made to them that this is not being done at the Palestinians’ expense…. Anyone who thinks that we can announce annexation again tomorrow morning and these relations will endure is making a mistake, so we have to be very restrained in what we do, and take their interests [Kobi Michael: i.e., the interests of those countries] into account in order to build layers upon layers of cooperation.”

Khader Sawaed also believes that peace with the United Arab Emirates is a positive measure, but “the people in Ramallah should likewise be addressed.” He recommended a proactive policy on the Palestinian issue, and proposed an Israeli initiative involving the people and leaders in the Gulf states, especially the United Arab Emirates, in order to obtain their aid for reconstruction in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority, which is also on the verge of collapse.

On the other hand, Assaf David holds that the Israeli political order in its current state is not ready to deal with the Palestinian issue, and the opposition therefore bears responsibility for finding parties in the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain with whom the matter can be discussed. In his opinion, an overture should be made to Qatar, because Qatar is at a key juncture between cross-interests. It has contacts with Israel, Hamas, Iran, Turkey, and even with the United States. He says, “If official Israel is entering the Gulf, opposition Israel can enter Qatar.”

Peace with the Neighbors

Ksenia Svetlova proposed a focus on improving relations with two neighbors with whom Israel shares a common border: Jordan and Egypt. She argued that while the Abraham Accords are important, our bilateral relations with these two countries are worsening. Perhaps in the new web of relations, it will be possible to step up economic cooperation, especially with Jordan, whose situation is deteriorating. There are too few people in Israel responsible for relations with Egypt, and the question is what will happen when they leave their positions. It is therefore imperative to widen this circle and expand these relations.

Tali Zinger and Udi Dekel contended that Israel should not act hastily; it should show restraint, moderation, and especially patience in order to integrate more deeply in the region in general, and in the Gulf in particular. Israel should avoid embarrassing the other side and appearing aggressive. A wise and judicious policy is likely to result in a peace that is slightly different from the peace Israel has with Egypt and Jordan, and to close relations between peoples.
According to Dekel, normalization should be regarded as a springboard for new initiatives, for example with Lebanon, inter alia in the context of the maritime border. In his opinion, Israel should act outside the established frameworks, and should consider all sorts of regional initiatives. As for Israel’s strategy with Iran, Dekel believes that the Gulf states are hoping that their connection with Israel will deter Iran from acting against them, but do not want this to lead to a military conflict that they will be unable to avoid. Israel should take this into account. He holds that the effective way of dealing with Iran is by formulating a joint policy with the new administration in Washington.

Conclusion
The decade of the Arab upheaval has brought about a restructuring of the Middle East. The system, be it the regional system or a system with other characteristics, now features a kind of “stable instability”; processes continue to evolve, problems have not been solved, regimes in some of the countries are still in power (Syria), or even if they have been replaced, they resemble the ones that have disappeared (Egypt), and there are high levels of state failure and crumbling and ineffective sovereignty (Libya and Yemen). At the end of the decade since the upheaval, Israel’s strategic situation is better as a result of the normalization processes, reflecting the widespread recognition of Israel’s necessity and strategic contribution to some of the countries and the diminished importance of the Palestinian issue on the agenda of most of the Arab countries in the region.

However, the improvement in Israel’s strategic positioning is not necessarily reflected in a profound change in the willingness of the Arab populations to accept Israel as a legitimate and integral part of the region. Despite the warmer relations emerging with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, the peace with Egypt and Jordan remains cold, and the normalization agreements with Sudan appear closer to the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan. Israel is deepening and consolidating its integration in the region, but is not yet an integral and legitimate component.

The Palestinian issue remains outstanding, and the room for maneuver is limited in this context, due to the expected changes with the new US administration and the need to take into account countries with which normalization agreements have not been signed. On the other hand, it is possible that owing to the new constraints and the realization by the Palestinians of the significance of the change, opportunities for improving the existing situation may develop through processes aimed at limited arrangements, rather than a permanent settlement, with participation and aid from the Gulf states, and possibly even Morocco. This could improve the existing situation and create conditions for further progress.

One shared insight from the roundtable is that Israel cannot remain inactive and adhere to a status quo policy. It must develop and improve its strategy in order to expand the framework of the normalization agreements, while demonstrating policy creativity on the Palestinian issue and integrating it wisely in the region’s restructuring process.

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The regional turbulence following the 2010-2011 popular uprisings in several Arab states, commonly known as the Arab Spring, caused significant changes in the region’s norms and codes of behavior. Indeed, one of the most prevalent contentions regarding the Arab Spring is that it encouraged many Middle East states to disregard the non-interference norm in favor of a more active role in other states’ affairs. However, while there was certainly an extensive increase in the volume of non-military involvement in some of the conflicts that erupted in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, most of these involvements stopped short of military interventions during the first half of the decade. In fact, only two military interventions occurred from the outbreak of the Arab Spring to 2015, both quite limited in their scope, and both on the invitation of the torn state’s government—Saudi Arabia in Bahrain and Iran in Syria. However, during the second half of the decade, military intervention in regional conflicts became much more prevalent, and those interventions became more extensive and prolonged—the joint Saudi/Emirati intervention in Yemen, the Turkish and Emirati interventions in Libya, and Turkey’s multiple interventions in Syria.

This article surveys the literature written about these interventions with a view to understand the shift in the Middle East regional powers’ responses to the post-Arab Spring conflicts. Because this literature review is primarily concerned with events that occurred in the second half of the decade, most of the
studies cited were written after 2015. Also, a significant proportion of the scholars whose studies are presented are Middle East experts (or those of Middle Eastern descent). The central question that this literature examines is what motivated these regional powers to intervene militarily in post-Arab Spring intra-state conflicts. While some of this literature still regards the Sunni-Shiite conflict, and especially the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as the main driver of these interventions, other studies suggest that the overarching motivation of these interventions was the rise of the Turkey-Qatar pro-Muslim Brotherhood camp, which changed the nature of the hitherto dyadic conflict to a tri-polar rivalry. Specifically, the rise of another power within the Sunni camp threatened the identities of the ostensible leaders of this camp, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), thus driving them to intensify their military involvements in regional conflicts. This new pole also competes with Iran for influence in Syria and Iraq. However, since this development did not compromise Iran’s identity, the Islamic Republic did not engage in any significant military intervention during the second half of the decade and relied mainly on proxy units to preserve its vital spheres of influence.

### The Sunni-Shia Dyad

Most of the literature on the Arab Spring, especially what addresses the intervention phenomenon, refers to the Sunni-Shiite conflict as the main fault line in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. Indeed, during the first half of the decade, most of the regional rivalry revolved around this cleavage, a rivalry dubbed by Gause (2014) as the “New Middle Eastern Cold War.” Gause argued that the outbreak of the new Cold War was not sparked by the Arab Spring, but rather Iran’s decision, in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, to embark on a mission to expand its sphere of influence by exporting its revolutionary doctrine to the region. In fact, in the 1980s the Iranian regime established two bureaucratic institutions designed to implement this goal: the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, and the Bureau of World Liberation Movements (which was closed in 1985). During the 1980s and 1990s, Iran sponsored various Shiite movements that rebelled against their Sunni regimes (Hunter, 1988; Kepel, 2000/2002; Matthiesen, 2010). This activity threatened Saudi Arabia’s position in the Muslim world, which was intended by the kingdom to advance its foreign policy goals and agendas (Kamrava, 2018). Hence, Saudi Arabia sought to balance, contain, and even roll back the Iranian influence in the Middle East. The most notable manifestation of Saudi Arabia’s containment policy was the establishment in May 1981 of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which included all six Arab Gulf monarchies (Chubin, 1992; Kechichian, 1985).

Most of the literature on the Arab Spring, especially what addresses the intervention phenomenon, refers to the Sunni-Shiite conflict as the main fault line in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. Indeed, during the first half of the decade, most of the regional rivalry revolved around this cleavage.

The United States 2003 invasion of Iraq escalated the tension between the two regional powers and, according to Nasr (2016), “created the most significant clash between regional rivals in decades.” This trend was further exacerbated as a result of the Arab Spring, since the popular turbulence and their subsequent conflicts weakened some of the Sunni regimes, thus providing the ayatollahs with the opportunity to advance their regional influence. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that Saudi Arabia and Iran carried out the only two significant military interventions from 2010 to 2015.

Consider the Saudi intervention in Bahrain: on March 14, 2011, 1,200 troops from Saudi Arabia and 800 police officers from the UAE (the Peninsula Shield Forces) entered the island kingdom to suppress a mostly Shiite uprising.
Iran perceived the success of the Sunni-led struggle against Bashar al-Assad’s minority rule in Syria as an intolerable threat.

In a similar vein, Iran perceived the success of the Sunni-led struggle against Bashir al-Assad’s minority rule in Syria as an intolerable threat. Although the ruling sect in Syria is Alawite, a faction that disengaged from Shia Islam in the 10th century and developed the characteristics of an independent religion, Syria is an inseparable part of the Iranian-led (mostly) Shia camp. According to Wastnidge (2017), “For Iran, Syria is a vital cog in its wider regional aims” (p. 154). Therefore, when the Assad regime was in immediate danger, Tehran was quick to intervene militarily on its behalf, first through Hezbollah in 2011, and in 2013 with its own army (Rafizadeh, 2016).

The motives for these first generation post-Arab Spring military interventions were straightforward—a sectarian rivalry combined with geopolitical/Cold War considerations of power and spheres of influence, i.e., Iran’s attempts to expand and maintain its influence and Saudi Arabia’s efforts to contain and even weaken it—and the literature addresses them as such. But these considerations cannot account for the “new generation” of military interventions, which became more numerous and extensive as the decade progressed. Since a significant part of the literature still looks at the Middle East conflicts through the Sunni-Shiite prism, it does not acknowledge how the emergence of a new force, a Turkey-Qatar pro-Muslim Brotherhood (MB) camp, affected some of the states’ perceptions. In fact, the formation of this new pole within the hitherto Sunni camp caused other members in it, most notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to further protect their identity, thus pushing them to increase their military involvement in regional conflicts.

**Inner Sunni Rivalry**

Some scholars have argued that the last intervention carried out as part of the Sunni-Shiite dyadic power struggle was the March 2015 Saudi-led intervention in the Yemeni civil war (Operation Decisive Storm). That intervention came after the Houthis, or Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), a Shia rebel organization, occupied Saana, the Yemeni capital (Ardemagni, 2017; Fisher, 2016; Salisbury, 2015; Zachariah, 2019). However, the claim ignores the extent of the ties between the Yemeni Shia organization and Tehran. Indeed, Iran’s support for Houthis is significantly lower than the support given to Hezbollah and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units, and the Yemeni organization shows much more independence than its Lebanese and Iraqi counterparts. For example, it carried out its initial attack on Sanaa even though Iran advised it to refrain from doing so (Juneau, 2016). In addition, even though both Iran and the Houthis are Shiites, the Zaydi Islam professed
by the Yemeni group is significantly different from Iran’s Twelver Shiism (Hokayem & Roberts 2016).

In light of such considerations, Darwich (2018) offers an alternative explanation for the Saudi intervention, and contends that portraying the Yemeni conflict as a proxy sectarian conflict is misleading. Rather, the intervention is best understood when examined in the framework of the Saudi struggle to assert its status as a regional power in the Middle East. Specifically, Riyadh aspired to preserve its status as the leader of the Sunni camp, after this status was challenged by the more aggressive pro-MB regional policy of Turkey and Qatar. As Salloukh (2015) noted, the MB’s populist brand of political participation threatens the tradition of political quietism and absolute obedience to the ruler—the anchor of the stability of the Saudi monarchy. El-Sherif (2014) concurred with this assertion and added that this threat became more acute following the election of MB-affiliated Mohamed Morsi as Egyptian president in 2012, since it could have triggered a potential domino effect. King Abdullah of Jordan, who in 2004 warned about the emergence of an ideological Shiite crescent from Beirut to the Persian Gulf, pointed in March 2013 to the emergence of “a Muslim Brotherhood crescent developing in Egypt and Turkey” (Goldberg, 2013).

As Akpınar (2015) noted, since assuming power in 2013, Qatar’s Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani aspired to boost his state’s regional role and thus adopted a proactive foreign policy. Hazbun (2018) added that Qatar used its previous ties with MB groups in the region in order to enhance its regional position. Hence, since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, Qatar supported and financed MB-affiliated organizations throughout the Middle East. But this independent and sometimes daring foreign policy soon put Qatar on a collision course with Riyadh. This was reflected already during these states’ limited involvement in the Syrian civil war. As Blanga (2017) wrote, “The Saudis’ unwillingness to support the MB and organizations with a similar ideology became the nub of the dispute between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Whereas the Saudis saw the Brotherhood as a radical and dangerous rising Islamic force, Qatar sought an alliance with the organization as a way for Doha to become a significant player in the Middle East—at Riyadh’s expense.” This strain culminated on June 5, 2017, when Saudi Arabia, alongside other Sunni states, severed their diplomatic and economic ties with Qatar and imposed a land, air, and naval blockade (Khashan, 2018).

**Turkey’s New Approach**

Similar to Qatar, Turkey also adopted an aggressive foreign policy in the years following the Arab Spring. As Elhusseini (2018) argued, the post-Arab Spring regional developments caused Turkey to redefine its relationship with the region. Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkish Foreign Minister from 2009 to 2014, declared Turkey’s new approach to the region in April 2012 as follows: “A new Middle East is being born. We will continue to be the patron, pioneer, and servant of this new Middle East” (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2016). In fact, Walker recognized Davutoglu’s new approach already in 2011 when he wrote, “Davutoğlu argues that Turkey is the natural heir to the Ottoman Empire that once unified the Muslim world and therefore has the potential to become a ‘Muslim superpower’” (Walker, 2011).

This change notwithstanding, Turkey’s initial involvement in post-Arab Spring conflicts was quite limited, and amounted to permitting the Syrian opposition to operate in its territory, providing material assistance to rebel organizations, and allowing them to enter Syria via the common border of these two countries (Cartalucci, 2015; Gunter, 2015; Phillips, 2016; Pamuk & Tattersall, 2015). But this limited involvement came to an end in August 2016, when the Syrian Kurds were about to achieve territorial contiguity alongside the Syrian-Turkish border, leading Turkey to invade Syria in Operation Euphrates Shield (Dalay,
This operation proved to be the turning point of Turkey's regional policy, for even after the realization of Kurdish territorial contiguity was no longer feasible, Turkey did not stop its military intervention in Syria. Some scholars even connected this interventionist policy to the Turkish regime's domestic predicaments, and especially to the failed coup d'état against the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in July 2016 (Altunışık, 2020; Kösebalaban, 2020; MacGillivray, 2020). That is, this proactive foreign policy, designed to return Turkey to its “natural place” in the region, was also intended to weaken or even eliminate the growing opposition to Erdogan’s longstanding rule. Hence, throughout 2018-2019, Turkey conducted two large-scale ground operations in Syria (Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring), involving tens of thousands of its troops, as well as thousands of other Sunni militia fighters under its command. Most of them are MB-affiliated or adhere to a similar ideology of this Islamic organization (Enab Baladi, 2019; Hinnebusch, 2020).

Turkey’s behavior in Libya is consistent with the support it provided to Mohamed Morsi in Egypt. In addition, after the Saudi and Emirati-backed Egyptian army ousted Morsi in 2013, Turkey increased its support for the MB and related Islamist groups in the region. Hence, various scholars (Helal, 2020; MacGillivray, 2020; Quamar, 2020; Zoubir, 2020) pointed out that Erdogan's support for the GNA is part of a wider scheme aimed at realizing his regional ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey’s growing assertiveness ultimately changed the nature of its relations with Saudi Arabia, as is evident from Saudi Arabia’s limited involvement in the Syrian civil war. Early in the Syrian conflict, Saudi Arabia provided financial and material assistance to Sunni organizations fighting Assad, including those holding Salafist and even jihadist ideologies (Blanga, 2017). However, in mid-2018, Saudi Arabia established communication with the Kurdish Syrian militia People's Protection Units (YPG), and even pledged to contribute $100 million for the benefit of the American mission in the YPG-controlled Northeast Syria. Başkan (2019) argued that this kind of development was implausible early in the decade, when Turkey-Saudi Arabia relations were at their historic highs. But in the intervening years Turkey lent its support to Mohamed Morsi. Başkan found that this support given by Ankara to the MB regime in Egypt constituted a watershed in Turkey-Saudi relations. Another important phase in the deterioration of these relations was Turkey’s decision to support Qatar in the June 2017 crisis.

Therefore, the Saudi intervention in Yemen can be better understood by examining it not through the limited prism of the Sunni-Shiite conflict, but in the context of the threat it posed to Saudi Arabia’s identity as a regional power. Saudi Arabia’s regional policy suffered several setbacks during the first half of the previous decade: Iraq became increasingly close to the Iranian camp; the so-called moderate opposition to Assad’s rule in Syria became more
identified with Ankara than with Riyadh; and Qatar constantly challenged its leadership of the GCC. The combination of all these events posed an intolerable threat to Saudi Arabia’s identity as a regional power; hence the kingdom’s decision makers felt that the fall of Yemen in the hands of an anti-Saudi organization was one failure too many.

**UAE: Threat Perceptions and Increasing Involvement**

Saudi Arabia was not the only Gulf monarchy to escalate its involvement in regional conflicts following the rise of the Qatari-Turkish camp. Another country that has become more aggressive in its behavior toward regional conflicts in the last five years is the UAE, which since 2015 has intervened militarily in both Yemen and remote Libya. According to Ragab (2017), for the UAE, the main perceived threat to its national security is the MB. The head of the Dubai police also stated in January 2012 that “the MB threat to Gulf security is equivalent in importance to the Iranian threat” (p. 41). Indeed, the UAE is a conservative, status quo state, and as such perceives the advancement of political Islam, which offers a vision of an ideal regime that is fairly inconsistent with Abu Dhabi’s attempts to preserve the region’s traditional values, i.e., its traditional authoritarian rule, as a threat to its identity (al-Zo’by & Başkan, 2015; Fenton-Harvey, 2020; Ryan, 2015). UAE’s de facto ruler, Abu Dhabi’s crown prince Mohammed bin Zayed, is also particularly worried about the popularity of the local MB-affiliated party, al-Islah. During a meeting with a US diplomat in 2006, bin Zayed was recorded saying: “If there were an election [in the UAE] tomorrow, the Muslim Brotherhood would take over” (Davidson, 2013, p. 14).

Hence, one of the reasons that drove the UAE to intervene in Yemen was to prevent the Yemeni MB party (al-Islah) from gaining too much power. For this reason, most of the UAE operations in Yemen were concentrated in the predominantly Sunni south and not in the Houthi-controlled north. The UAE is also the main supporter of the Aden-based Southern Transitional Council (STC), a 26-member council formed in 2016, which often expresses hostile attitudes toward al-Islah (Faulconbridge, 2019).

For the UAE, the main perceived threat to its national security is the Muslim Brotherhood.

The UAE also supported the commander of the LNA, Khalifa Haftar, and conducted numerous airstrikes against his opponents, the Turkish-backed GNA. In fact, the alliance between the anti-Islamist Haftar and the UAE preceded the Turkish military intervention in Libya. The UAE was particularly worried about the support given by Qatar to Islamist forces in Libya since the ousting in 2011 of Libya’s strongman, Muammar Qaddafi. Those Islamist militias used the Qatari support, which included arms and money supply, in order to achieve significant gains on the field. Fearing that this trend would lead to a domino effect that will influence its Egyptian ally, Emirati aircraft started in August 2014 to bomb sites in Tripoli held by those militias (McGregor, 2014). The Turkish intervention in Libya further aggravated the Emirati threat perception, causing it to intensify its air campaign against the GNA, and even, according to Bakeer (2020), to pressure Egypt to send its army to Libya to fight alongside the LNA.

In light of these developments, Shalash (2020) said that the hostility of the UAE-Saudi-led coalition toward the MB is one of the most prominent features of the post-Arab Spring era. Ragab (2017) adds that “five years after the ‘Arab Spring’ swept through the Arab region, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are among the most active players in the region. They are no longer concerned only with avoiding the wave of changes triggered by the Spring, but now pursue an active interventionist foreign policy in some Arab countries that they perceive as a threat to their national security and their role.
While the “first generation” interventions—Saudi Arabia in Bahrain and Iran in Syria—were driven by an acute necessity due to what was perceived as an immediate threat to the state’s security, the “new generation” interventions are more related to these states’ identity, following the rise of another pole within the Sunni camp.

in the region. The increasing activism in Saudi and Emirati regional policies is no longer based on money and diplomacy alone, as it used to be, but also on military means” (pp. 40-41).

Conclusion
It seems that the change that has taken place in the scope and nature of the military interventions of Middle East regional powers in the post-Arab Spring conflicts during the last decade indicates the change in the threat perception of these actors. While the “first generation” interventions—Saudi Arabia in Bahrain and Iran in Syria—were driven by an acute necessity due to what was perceived as an immediate threat to the state’s security, the “new generation” interventions are more related to these states’ identity, following the rise of another pole within the Sunni camp.

As long as the Sunni-Shiite struggle dominated the Middle East arena, Iran and Saudi Arabia were ready to take the immense risk inherent in a military intervention in an intra-state conflict only when there was an imminent danger to a state perceived as an essential sphere of influence. However, identity perceptions are more subjective and fluid by nature. For this reason, the transformation from a Sunni-Shiite dyadic conflict to a tri-polar rivalry, and especially the polarization of the hitherto Sunni camp, has caused the three main actors of this camp—Turkey on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other—to further define and protect their identity, in part by increasing their military involvements in the region’s intra-state conflicts.

However, this interventionist policy of the three Sunni powers stands in stark contrast to the behavior of the other pole of this struggle, Shiite Iran, which, since 2015, relies less on its own forces and more on proxy units. The identity explanation can also account for this variation. The inner Sunni struggle does not compromise Iran’s identity as the leader of its camp, and thus did not affect its regional behavior. Hence, Iran’s perception of the region did not fundamentally alter since the beginning of the decade: Tehran’s main concern is still to maintain and bolster its vital spheres of influence. Since the stabilization of the Assad regime, there is no real danger to any of the regimes Iran perceives as its allies (or proxies). Hence, Iran feels no urgent need to use its own forces, and uses proxy units in order to preserve the status quo in these states.

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Notes

1 Albeit a minority, the Shiites still constitute a significant percentage of the population in the Gulf countries—30 percent in Kuwait, 16 percent in the United Arab Emirates, and 10 percent in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.
An Arab Spring only in Tunisia—Elsewhere, an Arab Winter

The Arab Winter: A Tragedy
by Noah Feldman
Princeton University Press, 2020
192 pages

Oded Eran

It is easier to say what Noah Feldman’s newest book is not, than to describe what it is. It is not a comparative study on what is called the Arab Spring, which surveys the historical, political, socioeconomic, and demographic background of the Arab states as the backdrop to the events of the past decade. Nor is it a panoramic look at all the states in the region. The author, a professor of law at Harvard University, chooses to examine only a few countries in the Arab world—Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and Iraq—and the Islamic State of ISIS, which extended over parts of the territory of the latter two. Yet even this perspective, which ignores the Arab Spring in all the Arab monarchies, offers an important if narrow prism to the question, to what extent did the events and their results reflect the “will of the people.”

The book begins with an introduction that in effect summarizes the author’s conclusions that political action requires the acquisition of power, and this, he argues, was not achieved by the masses that went out to demonstrate. In the first chapter, Feldman discusses the Arab nature of the uprising and attempts to define what the people wanted. In the second chapter, he offers an analysis of the first wave of demonstrations in Egypt, which he calls “Tahrir 1,” and posits his conceptual theory regarding those participating in the protest as the “agents” of the rest the Egyptian people. The third chapter, on Syria, expounds on the helplessness of the Obama administration. In the fourth chapter, Feldman examines the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as a utopia, while also relating critically to the George W. Bush administration and the results of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The final chapter is devoted to Tunisia, which Feldman sees as the protest movement’s only success in the Arab world.

The book’s central argument is that it was not only the poor economic situation and the gross violation of the social contract, which in any case was nonexistent, that brought the masses to the streets. The primary reason for the protests, in Feldman’s view, was the lack of legitimate government, normatively speaking, compounded by the regimes’ lack of success in providing proper living conditions, dignity, and social justice (pp. 22-24). The author adds that the protest movements did not oppose democracy, but its absence was not deemed the root of the problem in the states and regimes of late 2010 and early 2011.

Early in the book, Feldman touches on a central issue that goes beyond the Arab and Middle East realm. While protest movements that declared the aim of regime change achieved this change, in many cases in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, the transition was from one autocratic regime to another. Feldman himself raises the dilemma when he asks: if regime change was what the people desired, did another form of autocratic regime also reflect its will? With remarkable intellectual honesty, he reaches the conclusion, though it is difficult for him to accept it, that this indeed is the case—even the return to autocratic rule, like what existed in the past and ensured stability, reflects the will of the people (pp. 25; 74-76).
The most prominent case, to which Feldman dedicates the central chapter in his book, is Egypt. The January 25, 2011 uprising was, in his view, an expression of the popular will. The masses that went out into the streets wanted change. There was no precise definition of the essence of the change, but the intensity of the demonstrations, the fact that the army stood aside, and the US administration’s response with respect to President Mubarak brought about the end of his rule. Feldman relates positively to the process that led to the election of Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood representative, as President of Egypt in 2012. His analysis of the Egyptian military leadership’s relations with President Morsi is interesting, but does not add to the academic literature or journalistic coverage of the issue. Feldman attributes Morsi’s removal to a series of mistakes by the President, led by his ignoring the elements that he overcame by a small margin in the presidential elections, contrary to the advice he received from the Tunisian political party Ennahda, identified with the Muslim Brotherhood, which compromised on principles and was willing to share power (pp. 52-56).

But Morsi was democratically elected, and Feldman—who deals less with the low voter turnout and its implications for the popular will and more with the events of “Tahrir 2,” that is, the June 30, 2013 demonstrations—concludes that the army’s return to a blatantly autocratic government expressed the will of the demonstrators, who expressed the will of the people. That is, even though the Tahrir 2 demonstrators wanted the removal of a democratically elected president, their demonstration was democratic and legitimate, as were the Tahrir 1 demonstrations in January 2011 (pp. 73-75).

This is in effect the core of Feldman’s book and the reason for his obvious disappointment with the results of the Arab Spring, which apparently prompted the title *The Arab Winter*. His disappointment stems from the willingness of Arab liberals, especially Egyptians, to betray the principles of constitutional democracy, knowing that in doing so they were returning the army to power. In Russia and Eastern Europe this occurred gradually over the course of more than 20 years. In Egypt, the transition from semi-autocratic government to semi-democratic government and back occurred within two years. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi deserves criticism, in Feldman’s view, but it cannot be said that he does not reflect the popular will (pp. 73-75).

The dilemma that Feldman addresses does not remain in the purely intellectual realm. It accompanies the leaders of the European Union when they decide EU policy in light of the results of elections in member states that bring to power populist movements bordering on fascism and ultra-nationalism, and Erdogan in Turkey and el-Sisi in Egypt. The return of a Democratic president to the White House augurs a complex dialogue between Washington and certain capitals in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and East Asia on issues such as human rights and freedoms, minority rights, and the rule of law.

The United State policy in the Middle East and especially its approach to aspects of the Arab Spring receive considerable attention in the book, which has particularly sharp criticism for the Obama administration. The main argument is that while it is true that the poor balance sheet of Obama’s predecessors in the Middle East constituted a negative incentive, this does not justify the lack of response to Assad’s use of chemical weapons to suppress the civil rebellion and the refusal to provide a no-fly zone to the Sunnis (pp. 89-95). Feldman properly diagnoses the American dilemma that stems
from the desire to aid forces that seek to change anti-democratic regimes, but without taking responsibility for the results. Such a dilemma emerged following the colossal American mistake of invading Iraq in 2003 and collapsing the governmental infrastructure there (p. 89), but the author does not offer an answer or a formula that allows the United States effective intervention that does not necessarily incur responsibility, such as acting in a multinational framework and with international approval. The new US administration will also need to address this issue, if it indeed seeks to implement its values-based policy.

As part of his criticism of the policy of the Bush and Obama administrations, Feldman notes that the weakness of the regime in Iraq allowed the initial consolidation of the Nusra Front, from which the Islamic State was born, first in Iraq and later in Syria. Exploiting its success in Syria, this group sent forces to Iraq that allowed it to run a state, albeit for a short time, in the area on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border (pp. 103-106).

Feldman, with strong intellectual integrity, contends—while recognizing the difficult nature of the argument—that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria reflected the will of the movement’s leaders and the will of those who joined it. He sees it as part of the events that unfolded following the Arab Spring and the desire of different groups to express themselves (p. xix). He arrives at a provocative conclusion: “While the Tahrir 2 revolution returned us from democracy to autocracy, the revolution in the case of the Islamic State returned us from the stage of self-determination (albeit terrible) to imperialist oppression [by imperialist oppression, Feldman means the struggle waged by the coalition forces against ISIS until its elimination: O.E.] and to the autocratic status quo of Assad’s rule” (p. 124).

Feldman’s composition is original and challenging, even if it does not contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon, the process, and the results of what is known as the Arab Spring. Some of his observations, such as those related to United States actions in the region, in particular toward autocratic regimes, should be studied by the new US administration vis-à-vis its approach to the Middle East. In this way it may be possible to avoid some of the mistakes of previous administrations.

Dr. Oded Eran, a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies, served as director of INSS from July 2008 to November 2011, following a long career in Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government positions, including Israel’s ambassador to the European Union (covering NATO as well), Israel’s ambassador to Jordan, and head of Israel’s negotiations team with the Palestinians (1999-2000).
Since 2014, ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) has become both a well-known brand name in the global discourse and al-Qaeda’s successor as the leading actor in the global jihad movement. Yet despite the enormous media exposure it has received, relatively very little was known about ISIS in the first few years after it declared the establishment of a caliphate and began a global terrorism campaign: its early history, before 2014, was almost unknown, and key figures in the organization—aside from its leader at the time, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (who was killed in a United States raid in October 2019), and its spokesperson until 2016, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani (who was killed in an air strike in August 2016)—were unfamiliar. This lack of basic knowledge, at least in the first years of the organization’s regional and international expansion, hindered the military and political attempts to contend with ISIS.

Academic research on ISIS subsequently took place against the backdrop of the Arab Spring, which rocked the Middle East in 2011-2012 and changed the geopolitical picture of the region’s security order: many commentators saw the rise of ISIS as a natural result of the instability in the Middle East that erupted during the mass uprisings in Arab countries, which strengthened radical Islamic groups in the region and weakened the existing regimes. ISIS did not play any role in the Arab Spring: the organization did not take part in encouraging or organizing Arab Spring demonstrations, and the book by Haroro Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter barely mentions this watershed. However, the organization benefited from the regional chaos and the undermined state order that emerged following the Arab Spring, and sought to exploit this turmoil in order to advance its objectives of regional expansion and establishment of a jihadi state in Syria and Iraq.

In addition, in its speeches, the organization highlighted and radicalized the sectarian discourse in Iraq, which was forbidden until 2003 and became legitimate after the United States occupation of the country. This discourse intensified throughout the Middle East after the Arab Spring, and especially after the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011.

Against this backdrop, it is important to understand the contribution of the ISIS Reader. Written by three leading researchers on ISIS, the book presents primary sources published by ISIS translated into English. Some of these sources, such as al-Baghdadi’s speech at the al-Nuri mosque in Mosul in July 2014, are familiar...
to ISIS researchers, while others are presented in the book for the first time. Some of the texts included are official publications disseminated as part of ISIS propaganda efforts, while others were written as internal documents for its supporters or leaders.

The ISIS Reader joins a series of books published since the September 11 attacks that have sought to present the ideas behind the global jihadi movement by making primary sources from central organizations and leading figures accessible to the general public (Lawrence, 2005; Ibrahim, 2007; Kepel & Milelli, 2010; Holbrook, 2018; Mansfield, 2006). The preference in the Reader for documents with organizational, practical content over the religious-apocalyptic texts that have so far captured a central place in works on ISIS is welcome. The sense is that at the current time, the religious framework in which the organization operates is important but familiar, and now there is a need to uncover other areas in research of the organization. At the same time, the religious framework of ISIS must not be overlooked. The correct analysis of ISIS must include both approaches, the religious-ideological and the practical-organizational, which are in constant struggle in the organization’s actions.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part traces the roots of ISIS and contains two speeches by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, who is considered the ideological father of ISIS. The second part, called “Baqiya!” after the motto of the Islamic State of Iraq (an earlier version of ISIS) from 2006 whereby the Islamic State “remains,” refers to the first “state” period of the ISIS movement: the Islamic State of Iraq, which the organization declared in October 2006, a short time after the death of Zarqawi.

The third part, “The Caliphate,” refers to the organization’s most famous period, from its expansion into Syria and name change to ISIS in early 2013 to its announcement of the caliphate in June 2014 and afterwards. This part also includes a document on the role of women in the Islamic State, which was written by women supporters of ISIS, and a guide for ISIS media activists—two documents that were never publicly disseminated by ISIS itself. The fourth and final part of the book, “Purification,” includes statements from the current period of ISIS’ decline. They emphasize the theme of the continuity of the Islamic State and the importance of patience and faith on the part of the organization’s members and supporters in light of the setbacks and the blows it has suffered over the last few years.

Most of the inquiries into ISIS in the Western and Arab media begin in the summer of 2014, when the organization declared the establishment of a caliphate, or in a few cases, in April 2013, when it declared its independence from al-Qaeda and changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Daesh is the Arabic-language term formed from the initials of this name). In contrast, Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter take a much broader look at the organization’s development: starting from the two speeches by al-Zarqawi, from 1994 and 2004, through al-Baghdadi’s final recorded appearance in April 2019. This choice of primary sources reflects the approach of the three ISIS Reader authors to the organization: despite frequent name changes since the mid-2000s, in the authors eyes’ they are all part of what they call “the Islamic State movement,” and this name enables relating to the ISIS phenomenon holistically, encompassing the different historical stages and the name changes that the organization went through over the years (p. 2).
Beyond making the sources accessible to the general public, the *ISIS Reader* enables an understanding of the organization in its own words for the first time. For the most part, the vast majority of what is known about ISIS is based on information provided by the organization’s various enemies or testimony of local and foreign fighters who defected from the organization. These reports created a partial (and often distorted) understanding of ISIS, its aims, and its motivations. These of course are joined by the atrocity videos of beheadings and other executions that ISIS itself produced and distributed, which helped position it within a short time as the ultimate symbol of evil. Following the atrocities depicted in these videos, the French political scientist Olivier Roy defined ISIS as “nihilistic” (Roy, 2017), while then-US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel claimed that ISIS is “beyond anything that we’ve seen” (Ackerman, 2014).

However, the primary sources compiled in the *ISIS Reader* paint a different picture, of a rational, organized, and disciplined organization: as the authors note, “The movement’s extreme violence seems like fanatical brutality, but it is typically deployed with the intent of achieving specific operational, strategic, and propagandistic aims” (p. 7). Despite this strategic rationale, it seems that often the extreme brutality of its actions actually unified its enemies against it, for example in the establishment of the international coalition against ISIS, which was formed in September 2014, comprising 83 member countries (Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh, 2020). This unification against it does not necessarily contradict the organization’s political and ideological objectives, which include a complete polarization between the West and the “heretical” Arab states on the one hand, and ISIS on the other hand. However, this intentional provocation ended up working against the organization, undermined its strategic success, and helped defeat its territorial project in the long term. Despite this tension between ISIS’s radical ideology and its rational-strategic conduct, the insight about ISIS’s rationality helps analysts understand and cope with ISIS, much like researchers learned to approach many terrorist and guerrilla movements in the past, and not as an invincible force of nature or a superhuman expression of pure evil.

One of the central texts in the book that deals with the processes of formation of the Sunni resistance in Iraq, first toward the American occupation and subsequently toward the Shiite government, is the document that the authors call “The Fallujah Memorandum” (even though it was not written in Fallujah, and the city is not mentioned in it). It is not clear if the document is authentic, and it is not known exactly who wrote it and when (although the authors date it from 2009); more importantly, it is not clear how central it is to the organization. The central motif in the document is the need to prepare for a full American withdrawal from Iraq (which occurred in 2011) and the attempt to work via the tribes and to recruit those who served in the “Sahwa.” An important point in the document is the organization’s concern about the success of the Iraqi Islamic Party, the most important Sunni religious party in Iraq, in gaining a grip in the Sunni region in Iraq. That is, the Islamic State in Iraq wanted to maintain Sunni dissatisfaction and channel the Sunni sense of deprivation and rage to intensified ethnic tensions toward the Shiite majority in Iraq and toward the creation of a Salafi-jihadist political project that aimed, from its perspective, to replace the Iraqi state.

Another contribution of the book is its presentation of the ISIS concept of victory in the global war that the organization has waged in recent years. Many leaders, including US President Donald Trump and former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, were quick to declare victory over ISIS, and Trump even justified his order to withdraw the US forces from Syria in December 2018 in saying that the US had “defeated ISIS” (Trump, 2018). In stark contrast, the organization’s leaders have
presented a completely different message. In a famous speech in May 2016, the organization’s spokesperson at the time, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, warned America that “the war with ISIS has not yet ended” and downplayed the importance of the organization’s territorial losses: “Do you, O America, consider defeat to be the loss of a city or the loss of land? Were we defeated when we lost the cities in Iraq and were in the desert without any city or land?... Certainly not! True defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight” (p. 251). Instead, Adnani claimed, “Victory—from our perspective—is to live as muwahiddin [those who practice tawhid, pure monotheism], to disbelieve in taghut [idols, the Salafi-jihadist term for the rulers of the Arab states], to fulfill al-Wala’ wal-Bara’ [loyalty and disavowal, a central principle in Salafi-jihadism], and to practice the religion [Islam]. If these conditions exist, we are already, and under all circumstances, victorious” (p. 255).

These ideas, which have since become a central theme in ISIS publications, present ISIS’s uncompromising ideological approach, whereby the organization’s sole raison d’être is to practice what it considers to be pure Islam and to struggle against the enemies of Allah, as the organization defines them. ISIS’s next spokesperson, Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir, repeated this definition of victory in his speech in March 2019, during the campaign for ISIS’s last stronghold in Baghuz: “The Islamic State has already won [since the Islamic State’s soldiers] still declare their undisputed faith [in Islam] and their proud doctrine” (p. 282). There is a dual message in his words: not only that ISIS’s definitions of victory and defeat differ from those of its enemies, chiefly the US, and are not measured in manpower or territory, but also that the war never ended. From ISIS’s perspective, this is a never-ending war, and any declaration of victory over the organization is baseless as long as there is even a small core of supporters and activists imbued with ideological passion who are willing to work to implement its doctrine.

Alongside these important contributions of the book, the authors’ analyses of the statements are at times problematic. In several cases the authors put forward fairly hasty theses. For example, they rely on a late publication in al-Naba (ISIS’s weekly newspaper, which is published in Arabic) regarding a raid carried out in 2012 by Islamic State in Iraq operatives on the town of Haditha, in order to draw conclusions regarding ISIS’s objective in conquering Mosul. In this raid, the organization attacked Haditha and withdrew from it; according to the authors, ISIS’s conquest of Mosul in June 2014 was also a raid that was subsequently expanded in a decision to conquer the left bank of the Tigris in order to capture retreating Iraqi soldiers. Is it possible that the organization planned to conquer only the right bank of Mosul? Is it possible that it intended to withdraw when the time came? The authors do not provide an answer to these questions.

Moreover, the book overlooks three important stages in the establishment of ISIS. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is responsible for two, and passing over them somewhat diminishes the contribution of the person who established the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and who later declared it a caliphate. The first stage was the establishment of miniature Islamic states in different regions of Iraq in 2006-2007, during the civil war and at the initiative of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The second stage was the appeal to disgruntled Sunni soldiers, veterans of Saddam’s army, to join the organization. These figures joined ISIS between 2012 and 2014 at al-Baghdadi’s initiative, and it is especially thanks to them that the organization attained significant military achievements, first in Syria and then in Iraq. During the heyday of ISIS (2014-2016), there was a debate among journalists and researchers about the level of importance and the real contribution of these former officers in Saddam’s army to ISIS (Helfont & Brill, 2016; Baram, 2016; Coles & Parker, 2015; Orton, 2015). Yet even if their real importance
to the management and success of ISIS is not clear, the organization saw fit to try to recruit them to its ranks. These men replaced the al-Qaeda operatives and the non-Iraqi volunteers, who usually did not have significant military or terrorist experience and did not know how to manage clandestine organizations.

The third important stage was the ability to work with the tribes in Iraq. The documents in the Reader show the ISIS leaders’ soul-searching regarding their inability to work with the tribes during the period from 2003 to 2008, which cost the organization dearly and contributed to its temporary defeat. If there was a warming of relations with the tribes, it occurred between 2008 and 2014, by exploiting the hostility between the Sunni tribes and the Shiite government in Baghdad during those years. The conquest of Fallujah in February 2014 was the climax of ISIS’s cooperation with the local tribes.

But more important than ignoring these stages, the authors, in their choice of documents and their analysis, define ISIS as an Islamic-Salafi-Wahhabi-takfiiri organization, from the family of global jihad organizations and a product of al-Qaeda. This is the accepted way of viewing the organization in the research on ISIS in terrorism studies and in the research on global jihad, which has studied ISIS widely in recent years. But the authors do not define ISIS as a Sunni organization. This definition has special significance in the Iraqi context: it denotes who are your enemies, whom you will invite to your ranks, alongside whom you will fight, and whom you will represent in a situation of social division. Explicitly referring to ISIS’s Sunni identity situates ISIS in a local context instead of in a more general global jihad discourse.

As researchers, we must ask to what extent ISIS was a Sunni-Iraqi organization and whether the organization is now undergoing a “glocalization” process in all its areas of activity. Consequently, relating to ISIS as a Sunni organization is of the utmost importance. Even if the ISIS state of mind and the Islamic State’s aspirations were formulated by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian jihadist, it is hard to imagine ISIS’s success in taking over cities in Iraq and recruiting thousands of activists to its ranks without relating to the sense of Sunni marginalization in Iraq after 2003 (which, as the authors themselves describe early in the book, Zarqawi consciously planned to intensify and exploit in order to push the Sunnis in Iraq into his arms). Explicitly relating to ISIS’s Sunni identity, at the beginning of the organization’s path and also today, would have helped explain its survival and success of the organization in the Iraqi arena, and not only its development as a leading player in the global jihad.

Despite these weaknesses, The ISIS Reader is a very important book for understanding ISIS’s strategic thinking, as well as the development of this thinking over time. Readers who are not familiar with the organization will find the book to be an excellent introduction to the history and ideology of ISIS, while researchers who are well-versed in the history of the organization will find the book to be a useful source for its statements over the years. Toward late 2020, ISIS reminded the world again of its existence and of the threat posed by its murderous ideology: the beheading of a teacher who depicted caricatures of the prophet Muhammad in a suburb of Paris by an ISIS supporter in October 2020, and shortly afterwards two attacks carried out by ISIS supporters in Nice and in Vienna, are new vivid demonstrations of the continued terrorist threat posed by the organization. The ISIS Reader is a welcome contribution to the research literature on ISIS and Salafi-jihadi organizations, and will undoubtedly expand the scholarly debate on ISIS and enable new researchers to answer fundamental questions about its development.

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References


Notes

1. The Sunni “awakening” that fought against al-Qaeda in Iraq and succeeded in almost completely obliterating the organization in 2007.
Looking ahead to the next few years, it seems that one thing is clear: nothing is clear. What lies before us is radically different from the post-1945 international scene, which while roughly divided into two distinct periods, was in both cases anchored in distinct and somewhat predictable themes: first the Cold War, and then, after the imploding of communism in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the unquestioned American hegemony. The current scene, by contrast, is in total flux, heightened of course by the havoc caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a phenomenon unprecedented and unequaled by anything known to humanity until now.

To speculate about the outcome of the pandemic would be futile, but other recent developments, global and regional, can be addressed with greater certainty, while not forgetting that much can still be upended by the course of the pandemic and the steps taken by different societies to confront it. It is crucial to point out that the impact of the pandemic has been exacerbated by globalization and the constant movement and travel of tens of millions of people as part of the economic and recreational aspects of globalization. Previous plagues took years to spread from their source of origin; in 2020, it took just weeks before the coronavirus engulfed the entire world.

The most significant recent political development has been the challenge to liberal democracy—its institutions, and even its very legitimacy.
democracy—its institutions, and even its very legitimacy. Far from enjoying the triumphalist vision of an End of History crowned by an almost messianic promise of the permanence of democracy, developments across the globe signaled serious cracks in the ability to withstand challenges, sparked in part by the failure of market mechanisms to self-correct under pressure when confronted by major crises.

These challenges to liberal democracy appeared first in some post-communist societies and were initially attributed to social and historical contexts specific to those countries. While early on it became clear that a transition to a consolidated democracy in Russia would not happen soon, mainly due to the state’s strong historic autocratic traditions dating back centuries, hopes were still held for other former Warsaw Pact countries whose histories were different and could help legitimate and sustain transitions to democratic politics and institutions. But further developments in countries such as Hungary and Poland demonstrated the strength of authoritarian and extreme nationalistic forces, in part harking back to historical memory and experience, which turned out to be stronger and more popular than the tendencies claiming allegiance to liberal institutions and norms.

But soon, and surprisingly, similar developments occurred in established democracies as well—first in Italy, and then in Britain and the United States, and in a slightly different form in France. The fragile multi-party system in Italy collapsed, Brexit was the culmination of a process of growing xenophobia tinged with racism in the UK, and the ascent of Trump in the US all suggested a deep malaise and a growing challenge to the principles and norms of the foundations of liberal democracies. The rise of the racist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party shows that even in Germany, which has justly prized itself for internalizing the lessons of its own history, ultra-right forces still simmer under the surface.

While the developments in these countries had specific and particular immediate causes in each respective society, they had one element in common: the weakening of the traditional parties on both sides of the political spectrum. Social-democratic and liberal parties on the one hand and conservative parties on the other had been the mainstay of the democratic post-1945 order in the West, reflecting a broad consensus for the values and mechanisms of liberal democracy. But these parties became ossified and highly bureaucratized, and in many cases lost touch with their traditional constituencies. They also moved from being the representatives of the traditional working class and lower middle classes and focused increasingly on identity politics and cultural issues—women’s rights, immigration, race, and LGBT issues. These were issues that obviously were anchored in norms of social justice and equality, but focusing on them much more than on the traditional material issues of the working class created alienation in wide sectors of the population. Loss of employment due to globalization, coupled with feelings threatened by mass immigration, some of it illegal, of refugees from Third World countries exacerbated these feelings of alienation and laid the foundations for the yearning for strong leaders who could addresses their immediate day-to-day problems largely neglected by the traditional political parties. This weakening of the existing parties or the populist transformation of these parties, as in the case of the of the Republican Party in the US, led tens of millions of voters to Trump and Brexit as well as to xenophobic parties and leaders in countries like the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden that historically had been the beacons of openness and tolerance.

A paradox underlying all these cases was that the process of European integration on the one hand led to a heightened consciousness of trans-national European identity, mainly among younger and university educated people, and at the same time strengthened chauvinistic
nationalism among other groups: the social divide in the UK regarding Brexit is a prime example.

The ubiquity of social media played a crucial role in these tendencies. While it contributed a lot to the democratization of the political process, it also helped move views that were confined to the margins of the public sphere into the mainstream of the political discourse. Authoritarian populists like Trump clearly utilized these avenues of mass communication and benefited from their availability.

Future historians will probably disagree about Trump’s motives, but there is no doubt about his policies’ outcome: undermining the transatlantic alliance has greatly helped Putin’s Russia, and together with the economic ascendancy of China, the challenges to democratic forces in the West are obviously growing.

The second major development is the retreat of the US from its historical role since the end of World War II as the bastion of democracy. The US can be justly criticized for many aspects of its global role, but the Soviet Union lost the Cold War to a large extent due to the American global role, even with all of its mistakes. This role was weakened first by Obama’s somewhat naive beliefs (in the Arab Spring, for example) and then more emphatically by Trump’s implicit support for Russian moves, especially in the Middle East, and his conscious attempts to weaken NATO and the European Union. Future historians will probably disagree about Trump’s motives, but there is no doubt about his policies’ outcome: undermining the transatlantic alliance has greatly helped Putin’s Russia, and together with the economic ascendancy of China, the challenges to democratic forces in the West are obviously growing.

This is not the renewal of the Cold War in the traditional ideological sense of liberal democracy vs. communist totalitarianism. But the weakening of Western democracies, which Trump’s presidency accelerated in a major way, now requires a rebuilding of historical alliances that must be reasserted both internationally and internally.

The regional aspects of these twin developments are clearly linked to the failure of the Arab Spring. The pious hopes that Arab countries could move swiftly from different forms of military dictatorship and traditional autocracy toward consolidated democracies proved to be out of touch with social and historical realities in the region. Different forms of authoritarianism seem to be able to maintain their hold in Egypt and Syria: on the whole, the Arab Spring was able to challenge military rulers, with mixed results, but was not able to undermine the legitimacy of traditional monarchies, especially if they are headed, as in Jordan and Morocco, by rulers considered descendants of the Prophet, or draw their legitimacy from the stewardship of the two holy sites of Mecca and Medina. These monarchies, as well as the Gulf states, mainly due to their oil wealth, seem now to be more secure in their hold on power than before the recent convulsions, though the rapid reforms in Saudi Arabia may bring unforeseen consequences in their wake.

As for the Palestinians, it appears that their wholly unrealistic approach to what they can achieve through international support has also cost them the hope they placed in an almost universal Arab consensus. They have boxed themselves into marginalization, and their inability even to establish a minimal consensus between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip may condemn Palestine to be a failed state even before becoming a state.

The greatly diminished power of ISIS should not be seen as the disappearance of radical Islamism, but calls for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon as one aspect of the vicissitudes of modernization in the wider world of Islam.

Western modernization was linked in various ways to processes of secularization, yet in the
Islamic word it took a different course. Thus, one cannot understand the current political developments in both Iran and Turkey, with all the differences between them, outside of this context. Both countries have seen radical attempts at secularization, but in both cases, these were not the outcome of wide popular demands, but were imposed forcibly from above by authoritarian rulers: Ataturk and the Shah tried to secularize their societies by adopting Western models of radical secularization and forced them on highly traditional societies. These attempts succeeded up to a point, but eventually led to a widely popular religious reaction to such attempts at forced secularization. The Islamic Republic in Iran and the rise to power of Erdogan’s AKP party are, in a way, the “return of the repressed,” and thus earned broad popular support within basically traditional societies against Western-educated and secularized elites. The power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and ISIS in Syria and Iraq similarly represents wide popular resistance to forced secularization imposed in these cases by military rulers. If one looks for parallels in the West, 17th century radical Puritanism in England would be an apt choice—an attempt to go back to an imaginary, pristine religious past.

These forces will not disappear, as they are structurally linked to the limits of forced secularization from above: the chances that either the ayatollahs or Erdogan will be soon toppled by secular democrats are an illusion. There will obviously be changes in Iran and Turkey, but they will come from within the existing regimes, not from outside the system. In countries like Egypt and Syria the alternative to radical Islamism is not a liberal secular democracy but different forms of military authoritarianism that get their support, not surprisingly, also from Christian and other minorities—the Coptic Church in Egypt and various Eastern rite Christian communities as well as Kurds in Syria.

These cross currents have their complex impact also on the Israeli scene, including Israeli-Palestinian relations. The continued dominance of Netanyahu’s right wing Likud is part of the universal weakening of center-left parties in Western democracies. This has obviously been helped by Palestinian intransigence and lack of realism regarding what they can achieve, and there is no doubt that Trump’s presidency greatly boosted Netanyahu and the Israeli right in general. The moves toward normalization with four Arab countries may have marginal impact on the strategic regional balance, but certainly contributed to a general feeling in Israel of achieving greater acceptance in the Arab world. They also clearly added to Netanyahu’s popularity in the country, despite the serious allegations of bribery and corruption now waiting to be addressed in the courts. This is unlikely to change under a Biden administration, though the tone and atmosphere may be slightly different. Most Israelis still have doubts whether the Palestinians are truly reconciled to the existence of the Jewish state, and the key lies in Palestinian hands to change this perception and thus enable the resumption of meaningful negotiations.

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There is no doubt that Israeli democracy is under stress, in part due to the general weakening of the liberal left all over the world, as well as the one party and its leader, Likud and Netanyahu, remaining in power for a long time. This is coupled by voices trying to limit the independence and efficacy of the courts. Yet overall the Israeli democratic system, with all its shortcomings, some caused by the continued control of millions of Palestinians in the territories, is basically resilient, as shown by massive demonstrations against the Prime Minister calling for his resignation.
Three inconclusive elections failed to unseat Netanyahu, but neither did they grant him the parliamentary majority needed for immunity from criminal prosecution, and for the first time there appear to be cracks within his own party.

If there is one lesson clearly to be learned from the pandemic it is that the market itself is not self-correcting. When a major crisis occurs, it is to the state and the government that the business community turns for help, and calls for social solidarity rather than individual self-interest become dominant. There is no “invisible hand” capable of stabilizing the economy, and it seems that only the government can be of help: contrary to Reagan, the government is not the problem—the inability of markets to correct themselves is. Conservative market fundamentalists, from Boris Johnson to Netanyahu, have come to admit it.

This means that one of the tasks of post-COVID democracies will be to rebuild a more effective social and economic safety net for wider sectors of the population. One of the tasks of post-COVID democracies will be to rebuild a more effective social and economic safety net for wider sectors of the population. This will also call for the restructuring of strong political parties, on the left as well as the right, to adequately address these problems and to avoid a situation in which alienated large groups will look to populist charismatic leaders as alternatives to the democratic process. The attempted coup of January 6, 2021 in Washington should be a warning signal. One cannot say anymore “it can’t happen here.” On the international scene, a serious effort must be made to reaffirm the legitimacy and efficacy of a rule-based international order that has been significantly damaged in the last years.

Both steps may ensure that even if democracy is not universalized immediately, existing democracies would be able to survive and be strengthened. Restoring stability should be the prime aim. It is a difficult but not an unattainable goal.

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Call for Papers for Strategic Assessment

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The current era has seen many changes in fundamental conventions relating to national security and how it is perceived at various levels. As national security research evolves, it seeks to adjust to new paradigms and to innovations in the facets involved, be they technological, political, cultural, military, or socio-economic. Moreover, the challenge of fully grasping reality has become even more acute with the regular emergence of competing narratives, and this is precisely why factual and data-based research studies are essential to revised and relevant assessments.

The editorial board encourages researchers to submit articles that have not been previously published that propose an original and innovative thesis on national security with a broad disciplinary approach rooted in international relations, political science, history, economics, law, communications, geography and environmental studies, Israel studies, Middle East and Islamic studies, sociology and anthropology, strategy and security studies, technology, cyber, conflict resolution, or additional disciplines.

In the spirit of the times, Strategic Assessment is shifting its center of gravity to an online presence and availability. While INSS will continue to prepare issues on a quarterly basis, articles approved for publication, following the review and editing process, will be published in an online version on the journal’s website in the format of “published first online,” and subsequently included in the particular quarterly issues.

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