



# NEW CONFLICT DYNAMICS

Between Regional Autonomy and Intervention  
in the Middle East and North Africa

Edited by: R. A. Boserup,  
W. Hazbun, K. Makdisi & H. Malmvig

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**The Middle East and North Africa**



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**Between Regional Autonomy and Intervention  
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**Edited by:**

**Rasmus Alenius Boserup**

**Waleed Hazbun**

**Karim Makdisi**

**Helle Malmvig**



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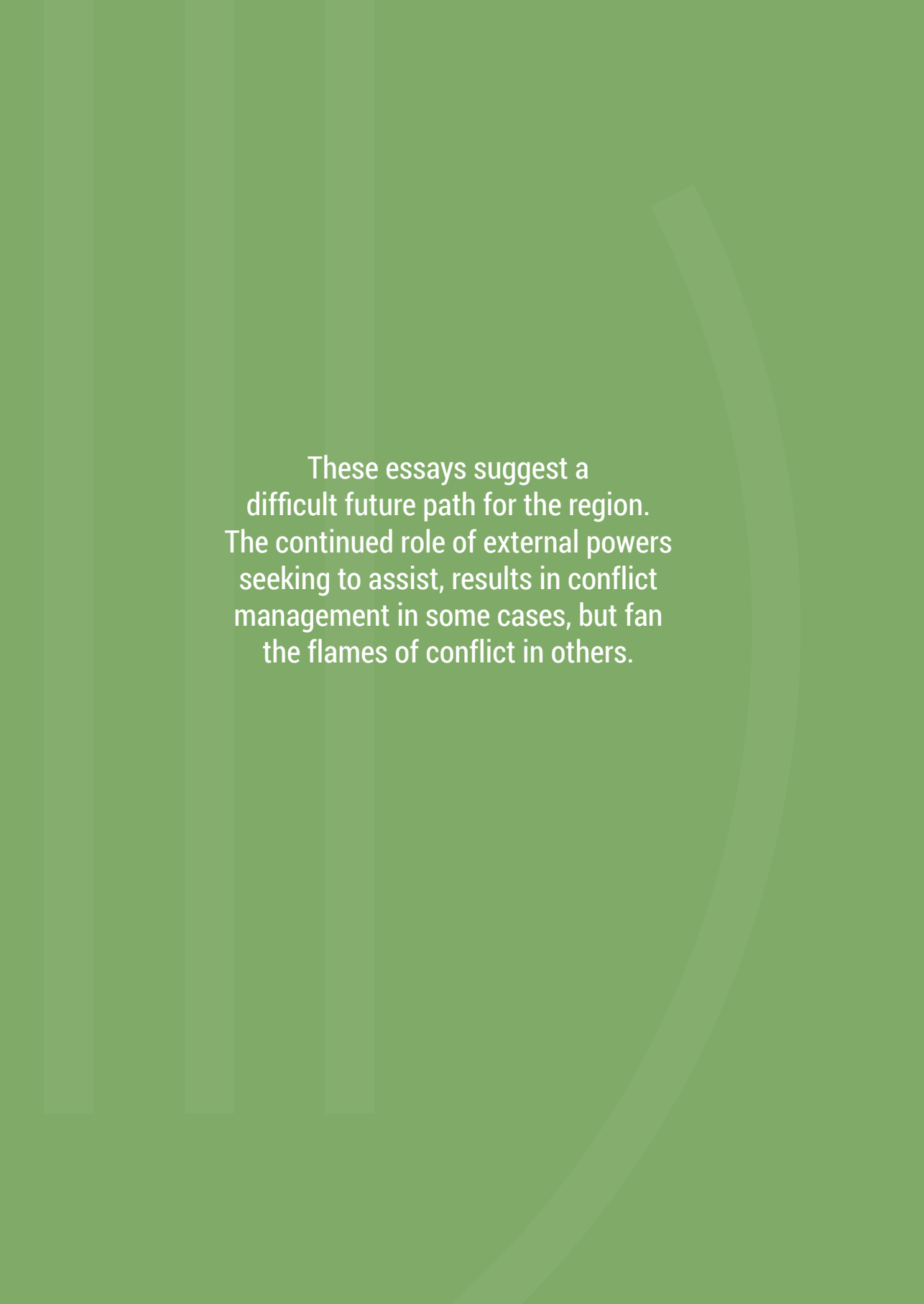
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These essays suggest a  
difficult future path for the region.  
The continued role of external powers  
seeking to assist, results in conflict  
management in some cases, but fan  
the flames of conflict in others.

## Introduction

# REGIONAL POLITICS AND INTERVENTIONS IN THE WAKE OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS

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**By Rasmus Alenius Boserup, Waleed Hazbun,  
Karim Makdisi and Helle Malmvig**

With the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, international politics became less directly shaped by the bipolar global competition between the US and the USSR. Many international relations scholars then shifted their focus to the regional level to explore increasingly autonomous regional security complexes. One exception to this global trend, however, was the region of the Middle East and North Africa. In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, the United States sought to establish a Pax Americana based on its recently acquired preponderance of military power in the region. With its 'dual containment' of Iraq and Iran, its management of the Arab-Israeli 'peace process' and its promotion of neoliberal economic reforms, American policy towards the Middle East sought to refashion and order the region. However, two decades and several wars later, this hegemonic position has been eroded amidst the collapse of the peace process, dysfunctional authoritarian regimes and the challenges of various forms of resistance that have emerged, particularly following the US-led war in Iraq in 2003. The Arab Uprisings beginning in late 2010 further delegitimized the regional order and reframed the politics of security in the region marked by the increasingly autonomous actions of regional mid-level states and antagonistic non-state actors, as well as the interventions of other external powers.

This collection of essays seeks to explore how, in the era since the outbreak of the first uprising in Tunisia, the increase in regional autonomy seems to have been confirmed, but also contested. On the one hand, regional 'middle' powers like Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and to some extent Qatar, Egypt and Algeria have in numerous

cases, ranging from Yemen and Libya to Syria and Iraq, engaged in more autonomous patterns of action regionally. This reflects an awareness on their part of the waning US regional hegemony and possibly the divergence of their national interests from US security interests. On the other hand, the void left behind by what many have called a US retreat and the decline in its political leverage in the region have generated new dynamics that seem to counter the tendency towards increased regional autonomy.

The most obvious example of this counter-tendency is the resurgence of French and Russian interventionism across the region and the subsequent pressure this has put on the US to reaffirm its claimed 'leadership' role in the politics of regional security. At the same time, sub-state and non-state actors have played an increasingly prominent role in shaping the dynamics of regional politics 'from below.' The erosion of state capabilities, the outbreak of conflicts such as the wars in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, and the rise of the Islamic State (IS) have also generated unanticipated humanitarian crises and migrant flows. These flows – particularly from Syria – have in turn been viewed as security threats by states and societies across Europe, the United States and the Middle East. As a result, external powers have struggled to contain the fallout of the regional Middle East and North African crises that they fear will threaten their own interests and security. In many cases, these concerns have led to support of, or at least acquiescence in, the reassertion of authoritarian state control and the backing of repressive regimes. They have also generated across Western societies a dramatic and dangerous resurgence of right-wing anti-immigrant sentiments and politics that have fuelled yet more intolerance and clashes.

How can we make sense of these new dynamics? What challenges do they pose for the international community struggling to find common interests, or at least common understandings, in promoting stability, security and human rights?

This collection is an attempt to address these and other related questions and to explore the dilemmas that they pose for international policy-thinking and policy-making in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa.

More concretely, this book is the result of a series of meetings and seminars held in Beirut and Copenhagen between 2014 and 2016 bringing together scholars and researchers affiliated with the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) and the American University in Beirut (AUB). Initially, the discussions at these meetings



were narrowly focused on analysing what was assumed to be the increasing autonomy of regional actors in the international politics of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as exploring the consequences of this shift in the direction of greater autonomy on international, regional and domestic politics. However, as our discussions developed over these two years, political trends in the region once again changed with the emergence of non-state actors as key players and the resumption of more direct interventionist policies by French, British, American, Russian and other European and regional states from the Sahel to the Levant. As a result, most scholars associated with this project grew increasingly uncomfortable with the original idea that had somehow imagined a linear process of increasing regional autonomy and agency within a framework of the retreat of the US. Instead they began exploring the dilemmas, contradictions and consequences associated with an emerging dynamic of what some might call 'incoherent' regional order still very much embedded in larger structural layers and global flows.

This book is the result of our collective effort to gradually add more complexity to the question of regional autonomy in the Middle East and North Africa and to map these new conflict dynamics.

It opens with a pair of essays on the putative American 'retreat' and its consequences for regional politics. As the catastrophic consequences of the Syrian war grew ever worse during 2016 and Russian intervention became more assertive, the debate on the America's decreasing willingness or ability to shape events in the Middle East once again took centre stage. Critics of the Obama administration's Middle East policy have blamed Obama for America's apparent weakness in the face of the carnage in Syria and its unwillingness to use, or even to threaten to use, meaningful force. These critics have urged the new administration that will be taking over from Obama in early 2017 to take more aggressive military action in Syria and elsewhere.

However, the chapters by Vibeke Tjalve, Rethinking Obama's 'Retreat': The Ironies of US Leadership in an Ungovernable World, and Waleed Hazbun, Beyond the American Era in the Middle East: An Evolving Landscape of Turbulence, put forward different analyses. They argue that the Obama administration's self-defined 'light footprint' does not signal a fear of governing or even of using military power, but rather a recognition that the Middle East – and much of the world – has become effectively ungovernable in the traditional sense and that the US can no longer unilaterally impose change on the region. Eroding state sovereignties and a myriad of non-state actors have rendered traditional means of state-centred power less effective, forcing

the US to invent new instruments and technologies for power projection and system maintenance, including the so-called 'leading from behind' doctrine. Thus, despite a strong push by some in Washington to use more traditional methods of military power to reassert what they see as 'strong' US leadership in the region, incoming president Trump will in reality have to come to terms with the decline in US leverage, meaning America can no longer centrally control and manage the complexities of contemporary dynamics in the Middle East.

The difficulties and dilemmas of US interventionism are also highlighted in Lars Erslev Andersen's chapter *Fighting IS: Learning from History, Security Beyond the State*. While the Obama administration has sought to avoid becoming directly enmeshed in 'big wars' in the region, it has still intervened in Iraq and Syria to fight IS. Examining the lessons of US counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq from 2007-2011, Erslev Andersen argues that the US lacks a strategy for the inevitable post-IS phase. The US may be able to defeat IS in the short run, but that will not fundamentally change the security dynamics on the ground. In the absence of reliable Iraqi and Syrian state systems that can provide basic security and incorporate the Sunni Arab population, Erslev Andersen warns, the US risks once again exacerbating sectarian violence and militarization. The state, in other words, is the key unit of stability.

If the US has been less willing to engage in big wars, focusing instead on new technologies and threats, as argued in Tjalve's and Hazbun's contributions, might that not have left a vacuum for alternative regional and international actors to fill? In her chapter *French Interventionism in the Post-American MENA Region: Filling a Void?* Manni Crone shows that French interventionism in North Africa and the Sahel is in fact dependent on the US and increasingly happens in close collaboration with it. Moreover, due to its colonial legacy and military overstretch, France has relied on strategies comparable to those of the Obama administration, such as disclosure, regionalization and burden-sharing. Importantly, Crone points out that, although France and the US frame their military posture in North Africa and the Sahel as having a 'light footprint,' in fact their military engagement on the ground has grown much heavier. Mobile operating bases, special forces and drone stations are more discrete and subtle, yet, as Hazbun stresses, they are also less visible and less politically accountable.

Moving beyond Western interventions in the region, the book also includes two chapters that discuss the role of regional dynamics and actors with a particular focus on the Syrian war. In Helle Malmvig's chapter, *Wars Within Wars: Regional Actors' Involvement in the Battle for Syria*, she examines the policies and interests that have driven key regional actors like Iran, Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel to intervene in Syria. These main players are all pursuing conflicting agendas and are engaged in multiple cross-cutting allegiances, which have fuelled and redirected the Syrian conflict. The Syrian war can in effect no longer be analysed as one war, but must be seen as multiple overlapping proxy wars. This dynamic, Malmvig argues, has made it much more difficult to engage in the political compromise and grand bargain-making that are needed to end the war. As Bashir Saade shows in his chapter *Hezbollah and its 'Takfiri' Enemy in Syria: Rethinking States and Non-State Actors' Relationships*, Hezbollah's decision to intervene militarily on the side of the embattled Syrian army was key in turning the tide in the Assad regime's favour, since it helped the regime regain significant amounts of territory near the Lebanese border. However, Saade argues that Hezbollah's rationale had less to do with the weakened Assad regime than with its own security concerns. For Hezbollah, moving the 'security' battle beyond Lebanon's frontier was preferable to jeopardizing the thin political and confessional equilibrium in Lebanon. In fact, with the intervention in Syria, Hezbollah successfully exploited the regional context of the Syrian war to serve its own local goals.

The last four chapters of the book supplement the international and regional perspective with alternative insights and approaches regarding how we may understand the current transformations of power relations in the Middle East and North Africa.

In his chapter *Intervention and the Uprisings: From Transformation to the Maintenance of Regional Order*, Karim Makdisi charts the evolution of intervention during the uprisings that began in late 2010 through to the war in Syria. He argues that intervention is constitutive of regional and international orders, not exogenous to them. As such, the main struggle to determine a particular order pits those who are seeking to transform it against those who are battling to maintain it. Moments of crisis occur when there is a challenge to the existing forces and power structures that are maintaining stability, as occurred during the Arab uprisings. The chapter begins by recounting the early Qatari-Turkish phase – suggesting it represents a transformational phase managed by the US under the cover of 'leading from behind'

– and then explores the Saudi backlash, which challenges the role of Qatar and Turkey in the name of seeking a return to stability. Makdisi ends with a discussion of the post-2015 phase in which the US tried to reassert some control, given that non-state actors had filled the vacuum created by the regional collapse of states.

In his chapter *The Importance of the Domestic Scene in Arab Politics*, Rasmus Alenius Boserup presents a counterpoint to other essays that highlight regional and external intervention by making the case that the key drivers of change in the region remain domestic factors: popular protests on one hand, and counter-revolutionary measures by authoritarian regimes on the other. Referring to a host of examples, including Syria, Bahrain, Libya and Egypt, Boserup argues that the dynamics of domestic conflict remain at the core of contemporary power struggles in the region, with regional and international actors and dynamics depending to a large extent on these patterns of domestic conflict. As such the chapter traces how, by eroding the capacities of states, domestic conflicts opened the door to regional and external international intervention, coupled with proxy warfare.

Coralie Pison Hindawi expands the scope of the volume's focus in her chapter *Western Arms Transfers and Control Policies and their Impact on the Middle East: Controlling, Empowering Regional Actors, or Fuelling Wars?* Her contribution reveals how Western arms exporters have continued to favour short-term economic and strategic interests over ethical and long-term strategic ones. She emphasizes how current policies regarding the transfer of military technology have failed to constrain the region's geopolitical conflicts. Indeed, Pison Hindawi argues that Western arms transfers fuel wars and undermine the ability of non-violent and democratically minded local agents to impose themselves as power-brokers.

Finally, in his chapter *Environmental Crisis and the Syrian War: Regional Instability in a Global Context*, Alex Barder explores the role that climate change plays as a driver behind the Syria uprising and ensuing civil war. His chapter shows how climate change may be understood as a 'stressor' that helps trigger conflict and rebellion. It also demonstrates how the persistence of drought conditions has led to increased migration from rural to urban locations that has exacerbated social and class tensions. Looking beyond the scope of the current regional crisis in the Middle East and North Africa, Barder calls for further scholarly attention to be paid to the interrelations between climate and conflict and for the limits of the traditional tools of diplomacy and security policies to be recognized.

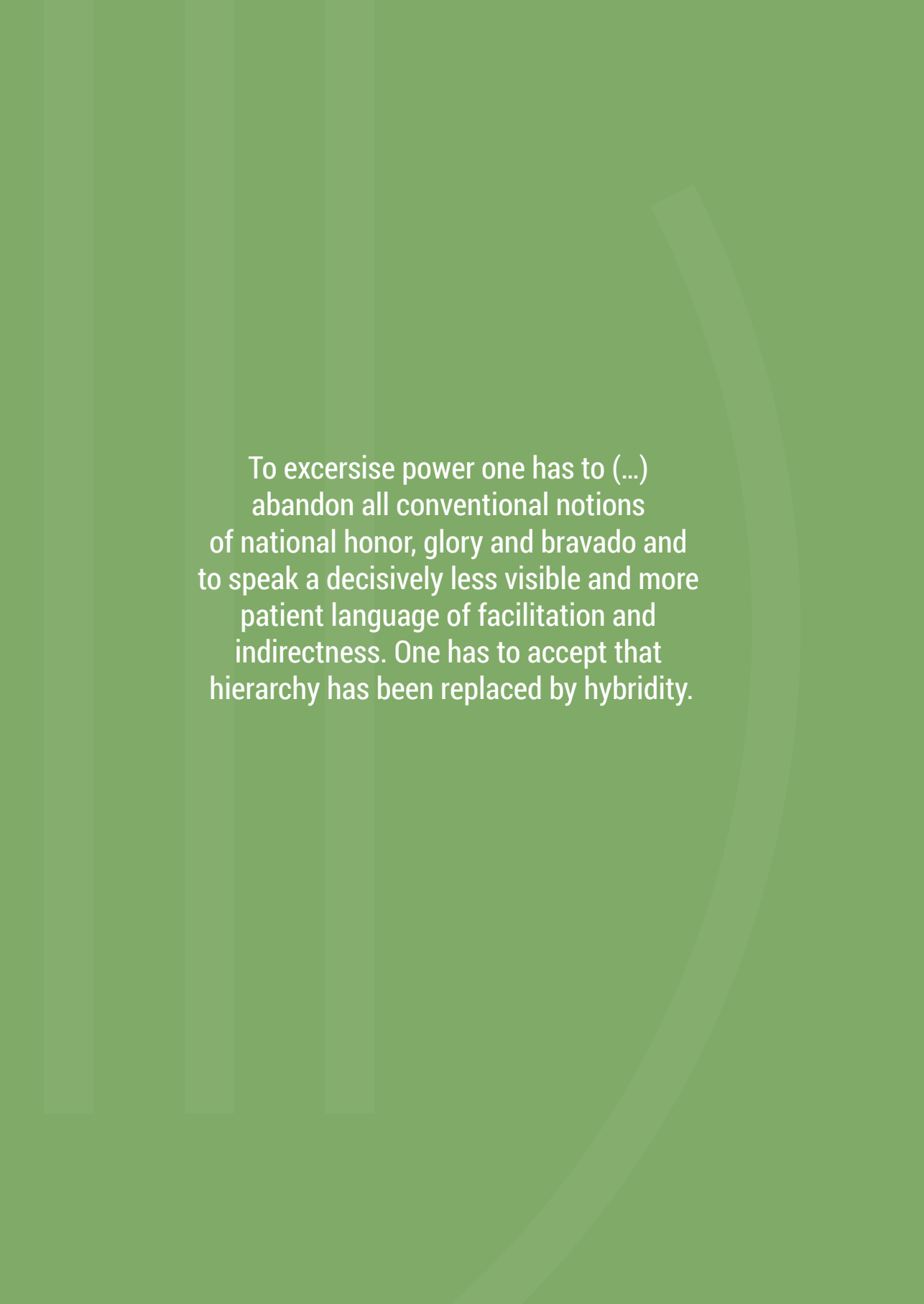
Taken together, these essays suggest a difficult future path for the region and the continued role of external powers seeking to assist in conflict management in some cases, but also to fan the flames of conflict in others. While the contributors each place their focus on different aspects of regional politics, overall their arguments tend to be relatively consistent, but most of all complementary. They help piece together a survey of the erosion of the US-led order and its replacement by a new era of regional competition that includes state and non-state actors and networks, as well as traditional and new technologies and strategies of warfare. In other words, the 'new Arab Cold War' that arose in the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq has evolved from a roughly bi-polar competition for regional influence into a complex, multisided, multilevel geopolitical struggle. Rather than a regional two-sided struggle that might be subject to *détente* through a balance of forces, or possibly a grand bargain to settle outstanding issues and establish a new, restructured regional order, there is little disagreement across the authors that the region will be an unstable and likely violent one for the foreseeable future. That future will be shaped by the nature of continued external interventions, social conflict and state–society tensions that are unlikely to be resolved. Rather than states seeking to craft authoritarian bargains, appease or buy off a social base, or simply use repression to impose order, the region's rulers face mobilized societies that can often seek support (and arms) from outside patrons or non-state actors. While regional states must face challenges 'from below', they are also engaged in struggles against regional rivals, who in turn seek their own external patrons. For actors at all levels, including those beyond the region, not to play this game means finding themselves increasingly weak and insecure. The multilevel security dilemma is being played out in an era when broad trends, from rapidly deteriorating environmental conditions to the nature of the global order, make the prospects for reducing conflicts and stemming the humanitarian tragedies seem bleak.

If we were to try and imagine some future, more stable order, two differing logics suggest themselves. One is the logic of authoritarian control in which state powerholders re-establish meaningful sovereign control over their territories, rooting out both foreign jihadists and remnants of the democratic activists that were mobilized in the early phase of the uprisings. This logic might eventually lead the region back to a Middle East defined by overlapping cold wars, such as those between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Turkey and the Kurds, Israel and the Palestinians, and so forth. Under these conditions, diligent diplomacy at forums such as the United Nations will be needed to ensure that conflicts do not periodically turn hot, though in these circumstances societies will continue to face repression while

lacking a voice. The second logic one could imagine is that of increased fragmentation and chaos in which state rulers no longer effectively manage large territorial power containers or states. This is the logic that, for want of a better term, might be called the 'Lebanonization' logic, in which the region evolves into an increasingly fragmented patchwork of local authorities, with rump states controlling highly truncated zones of their official territorial boundaries, while a motley range of prominent individuals, militias, regional governments, proxy forces and local self-organized councils govern a complex landscape where no party is able to attain hegemony over large areas of the map. In both of these logics, one could imagine different larger structures of power operating globally, but with uneven penetration into the region.

While these essays do not specifically suggest a path forward, they do at least hope to provide a map of the difficult, treacherous terrain to help guide those seeking to venture into it.



The background is a solid green color. It features several vertical stripes of varying shades of green, creating a textured effect. A large, thin, curved line, also in a shade of green, sweeps across the right side of the image, starting from the top and curving downwards.

To exercise power one has to (...) abandon all conventional notions of national honor, glory and bravado and to speak a decisively less visible and more patient language of facilitation and indirectness. One has to accept that hierarchy has been replaced by hybridity.



Rethinking Obama's 'Retreat'

# THE IRONIES OF US LEADERSHIP IN AN UNGOVERNABLE WORLD

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By Vibeke Tjalve

## INTRODUCTION: A POST-AMERICAN MIDDLE EAST?

As the Obama presidency draws to a close<sup>1</sup>, one persistent and surprisingly unanimous narrative has emerged: that US foreign policy is in retreat – from world leadership and, by implication, from the Middle East. This narrative has several different versions.

There are those who explain American withdrawal as a phenomenon inherently tied to Obama the man: Obama is indecisive, Obama is weak, Obama is afraid. This is the narrative of human rights liberals, who are disappointed with Obama's deliberate refusal to take on the sufferings of a prolonged civil war in Syria (Powell), as well as of national security hawks, baffled by Obama's preference for the language of 'patience' over 'strength', and downright dismayed by his reservations about the reach and relevance of conventional forms of military might (Kagan). This is also the verdict of those who most strongly securitize, and yet strangely admire, the nineteenth century-style bravado of Russia's President Putin.

And then there are those who view the roots of American retrenchment as more structural and as such more endemic: it is the US as such that is weak – or at least has been profoundly weakened – as the brief but spectacular moment of American hegemony fades and the contours of a multipolar world order take shape. This is the narrative of 'the post-American order' (Zakaria) and of 'no one's world' (Kupchan).<sup>2</sup> It is also the narrative of the post-American Middle East – of a return to normalcy in

American foreign policy and, by implication, of an increasingly autonomous Middle Eastern region, helplessly swimming the seas of a 'vacuum' or 'void' left behind by deserting American forces. Whether in remorse or endorsement, it is the somber narrative of American 'pull back', 'retrenchment' or 'scaling down' (Walt).<sup>3</sup>

Powerful as it is, this narrative is wrong, and to embrace it leaves little leeway for understanding first, how the US–Middle Eastern nexus got here, or secondly, where it might be going next. In the simplest of terms, of course, the answer is yes. Yes, the character traits and philosophical outlook of President Obama have mattered immensely in leaving behind the kind of full-scale military operations embraced by the previous administration. Yes, a John McCain or a Mitt Romney would unquestionably have taken different steps, including a markedly more visible display of US military might. And yes, American policies must increasingly adapt to a world where other states matter too.

Yet the US is not in any straightforward way 'in retreat'. Long-term changes in the US practice and perception of what 'global leadership' means are indeed taking place, but not for these reasons, and not in this way. Arguably, the impetus behind the current transformation of American foreign policy is neither a lack of will to wield power, nor of the weight to do so: it is the belief that the object of US leadership – the world which the US seeks to govern – has changed. Indeed, the core claim of this chapter is that the shifting rules and roles of American governance in the Middle East have less to do with America's fear of governing and more to do with a world that has, in important ways, become ungovernable. Arguably, the dividing lines currently emerging in US foreign-policy debates, including those that defined the 2016 presidential election, are all about how to handle, react to or defy that 'ungovernability' as well.

## **WHY THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY RESISTS HEGEMONY: THE OBAMA VIEW OF THE WORLD**

It is important to stress that Obama ran and was elected on a platform of renewing American leadership in the world, not of refraining from it. Foreign-policy questions have made up the bulk of Obama's presidency, and almost all the issues of American politics – economy, trade, energy, health, migration, security – are ones that Obama understands as part and parcel of global structures. Obama, in short, is no isolationist – in many ways he is a globalist. Why, then, does the Obama presidency seem to have been retreating from using American power and exercising

American leadership? It is because 'global' to Obama means post-sovereign; that is, there is a recognition that a networked, partnered and mediatized world is one which in important ways resists conventional forms of state power, and certainly one in which the walk and talk of manifesting hegemony is most often counter-productive. Three aspects of contemporary global politics have led Obama – and key policy advisers such as Anne Marie Slaughter – to that conclusion.

### **Digital Publics and the Power of Crowds**

First of all, Obama's notion of the world as somehow heading towards a more post-national system, and his recognition of the limits of conventional forms of state power and diplomacy, are deeply tied to his early foreign-policy experience with the Arab Uprisings. According to central figures in the Pentagon and US State Department, Obama's main observation during the early uprisings was that crowds, not statesmen, publics, not generals, are now the driving force of international politics. Obama has received sustained criticism for not focusing enough on the political leaders of the Middle East – for refraining from the kind of phone-call diplomacy that his predecessor had made central and for initiating far too few meetings among the political and military decision-makers of the region – a lack, however, which Obama's Secretary of State, John Kerry, has tried to remedy. From Obama's chair, the nature of the uprisings underscored an already existing sense – present throughout Obama's own presidential campaign as well – that the most important dynamics of politics are now driven by the kind of publics made possible by digital media. Such publics do not have hierarchical structures – they do not have formal representation and cannot be spoken for by a handful of political leaders.

To a large extent, this was the recognition driving the Obama administration's initial strategy of 'leadership from behind': a sense that no simple forms of top-down American leadership are possible, given that heads of state no longer rule in quite the same way as they used to. Partly, the 'leading from behind' doctrine was about disciplining Europe and the EU into assuming a more active and responsible role, an ambition which succeeded in cases such as Libya, at least in the early stages of that conflict. Yet it was also a label coined to cover a much deeper transformation of what leadership means. It emerged from a sense that the structure of world politics as such is changing because heads of state and the councils of international organizations increasingly have to reckon with their opinions, motivations and decisions constantly being negotiated and reconfigured by 'the people'.

Even before he took office, Obama was clearly striving to formulate these trends. Yet it was during the Arab revolts and the central role that often transnational political, ethnic and religious social movements in the Middle East played within them that he made understanding and adapting to the reality of 'crowd politics' a central theme of foreign-policy impact. As the Arab revolts unfolded, the Obama administration pushed to the fore such questions as: What to do when your allies and adversaries have no fixed political goal, nor any formal political representation? What can power be, and through what channels can it work, if you cannot clearly identify or sit down with those whom you hope to assist, persuade or defy? What to do, in short, when what you seek to exercise authority over is flat, networked and in constant transformation? Arguably, 'leading from behind' was not just a slogan for forcing Europe to do more: it was also the Obama administration's response to 'crowd politics', moving to a position of more withdrawn and indirect shaping, a position from which one can facilitate or 'nudge', while resisting the futile if not totally counterproductive strategies of top-down military and economic power. To the Obama administration, in short, the street and the blogosphere have grown into important objects of governance, with 'twitter diplomacy' becoming a central instrument of power.

This is not to say that Obama does not tie an international crisis of the proportions now unfolding in Syria to the will and decisions of political leaders like Assad. Obviously, he does – and part of the Obama analysis for not becoming more involved than he has done is undoubtedly a very conventional geopolitical analysis of the potential implications of pulling stakeholders like Iran in or escalating the conflict to a global level, confronting powers like Russia or China on the issue of sovereignty and non-intervention. Yet in Syria too, despite the fact that part of the conflict looks very much like a conventional balance of power struggle, the Obama administration sees a world transformed. There is no single 'people' to save, but a multitude of religious, political, cultural and ethnic groups, constantly articulated and re-articulated on digital and deeply mediatized platforms. At times, that analysis has simply smacked of good old-fashioned Orientalism – of an American administration that views Middle Eastern societies as plain 'backward' or 'amateurish'.<sup>4</sup> At other times, however, the driving force has been a more profound analysis of how digital communication, globalized media and post-national identity complicate both national politics and international diplomacy. Whether driven by lazy Orientalist or complex post-modernist reflections, however, the conclusion for the Obama administration has been consistently clear: conventional forms of the state-to-state wielding of authority fall short when the states you are seeking to shape lack either a formal infrastructure or a stable or obvious 'people' to endorse.

### **Partnership: Public, Private, Hybrid?**

Secondly – and closely tied to the notion that digital technologies of communication have enabled radically altered forms of social, political and economic relations – the Obama administration has been acutely aware that none of the challenges of the 21st century can be solved by the nation state as such. Climate, health, mass migration, terrorism, digital communication, cyber security, social upheavals, religious conflict, (g)local civil wars – every single one of the issue areas of international politics has appeared to the Obama administration as fundamentally dependent on both public and private partners, local and global stakeholders, technical and political elites. This is a recognition that the world is not only growing multi-polar. Not only are other states becoming more powerful, the state as such is losing power, unless it turns itself into a facilitator or broker of the hybrid forms of interest, capital and expertise that engulf all political problems.

It is a recognition, in short, that the technical and often networked nature of global problems resists simple forms of state power, as well as a demand that states develop qualities such as adaptation, flexibility and decentralization. That recognition cannot be divorced from what we may term the ‘communicative’ aspect of statecraft. Undoubtedly, the Obama administration has been keenly aware that state power cannot be flagged or bragged about at every given opportunity if one wants to operate successfully in a world of partnership. Partnership, by its nature, means making others feel important too – the very opposite of self-promotion. To exercise power, one has to erase it, to appear cooperative or co-authoring, not coercive. One has, in a sense, to abandon all conventional notions of national honor, glory and bravado and to speak a decisively less visible and more patient language of facilitation and indirectness. One has to accept that hierarchy has been replaced by hybridity, by the mobilization and accommodation of multiple interests, logics and stakeholders. Hence ‘leadership from behind’, hence the ‘strategy of patience’, and hence Obama’s Cairo speech, given early in his presidency and initially praised across the Middle East, not just for its invitation to dialogue between East and West, but for its vision of the future as a place co-authored by the world, rather than imposed by the US.

### **‘Light Footprints’**

Thirdly, and importantly, Obama’s doctrine of how to intervene, if at all, in the ‘post-national’ or ‘post-sovereign’ world is tied to the transformation of warfare. If President Obama has been a fierce advocate of ‘leadership from behind’, he has certainly not been an advocate of American military retreat. In fact, the United States today has more regional bases and facilities, more aircraft, ships and

personnel deployed, than the British had at any point in their 150-year suzerainty of the Persian Gulf. He is also the American president who has sold the most weapons to the countries of the Gulf. What is happening however, is that American policies increasingly opt for the subtle: wars are growing steadily less 'warlike', and steadily less visible.<sup>5</sup>

Here, there can be no doubt that Obama has not only 'adapted to' but also assisted socio-political trends. There are many reasons why wars are growing less warlike, but during the eight years of the Obama presidency the US has certainly embraced part of that 'unwarlikeness' and contributed further to it. It has done so, in part, for benign reasons. Obama wanted to get away from the enormous collateral damage of large-scale warfare using ground troops and opted for the decisively more limited damage of drones. He wanted to limit the use of force – and, when opting for force, he wanted either to support local forces in pushing American preferences, or for American forces to be subtle ideally invisible. This was not just to cover the American use of violence upwards, but because he sincerely believed that, if the destructive dynamics between American exceptionalism and global anti-Americanism were to be brought to an end, the in-your-face presence of large-scale American military forces would have to be brought to an end first.

What this has led to is basically a 'light footprint' kind of strategy, one that exerts state power in more concerted, partnered and largely invisible ways. Obama has, as Gary Stick puts it, opted for a 'more judicious use of US political and military might',<sup>6</sup> one that often strategically chooses to leave the glory (or the blame) to others. 'Judicious' is no small word. It signifies something dramatic in the Obama administration's approach to military power: a sense that that power somehow needs to be exercised subtly rather than bragged about, that it needs to appear as if it is being exercised by invitation rather than by force, and that it needs to be practiced with local partners if it is to appear legitimate in a globalized, mediatized world.

That the 'light footprints' logic is slowly growing into a doctrine is indisputable. As US Lieutenant-Colonel Guillaume Beaurpere wrote earlier this year in *Special Warfare*, the American military now recognizes that 'a direct and overt presence of US forces on the African continent can cause consternation...with our own partners, who take great pride in their post-colonial abilities to independently secure themselves'. The author continues by suggesting that special forces must therefore be trained 'to operate discretely within the constraints and the cultural norms of the

host nation'.<sup>7</sup> They must, in short, be trained to operate in partnerships and patterns that exert influence but avoid bragging, that pursue power but erase the face and trace of it (see also the chapter on France by Manni Crone, this volume, for this point).

It is by no means clear that such a doctrine leaves behind an American foreign policy that is any less militarized than Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush, did. As Sarah Wittes recently pointed out, the 2016 Obama administration 'moved from airstrikes, to 475 additional military advisers in Iraq, to over 4,000 troops on the ground, including U.S. special-operations forces in both Iraq and Syria', while 'the metastasizing threat from Islamic State (IS) is forcing Obama to order limited military strikes in Libya, consider plans for further military intervention there, and build up military commitments to the Sunni Arab states of the Persian Gulf'.<sup>8</sup> Yet Obama has transformed the nature of that militarization by 'partnering' or 'enmeshing' American military power in ways that often erase the direct face of it.

## **US FOREIGN POLICY AFTER OBAMA**

That, then, is the paradox that currently haunts American foreign policy, not least towards the Middle East. To be politically effective, a post-national foreign policy would seem to need more indirect forms of political shaping, more decentered and enmeshed forms of cooperation, less spectacular or bragging types of posture – to invite co-authoring and partnership. To be publicly attractive, though, it needs to show willpower, forcefulness and decisiveness. Although the world has become a network, the people still vote for those who claim to be 'in charge', those who insist that the central, hierarchical and visible exercise of state power is a possibility. Where does that leave the likely future of US foreign policy in the Middle East?

To judge from the dividing lines in this year's US presidential election, American foreign policy debates in the near future will be defined by two very different visions of how the US should approach its role in world politics after Obama. One argues in favor of adjusting but ultimately continuing President Obama's vision of 'post-sovereign' or 'post-conventional' forms of American influence in a globalized world. The other wishes to re-assert more conventional forms of power – a kind of 'sovereignism' more akin to nineteenth-century European geopolitics. Examining these two visions in slightly more detail is important, partly because they both look decisively different than the actively internationalist 'American exceptionalism' that

defined US policies throughout most of the twentieth century. Moreover, understanding these visions and the interplay between them is important because the battleground of Western foreign policy, and not least the issue of Western interventionism, is likely to play itself out as one between the increasingly open-ended, post-national or 'global governance'-driven types of processes that Obama has been key in enhancing, and the kind of anti-globalist responses that not just Obama's successor, President-elect Donald Trump, but pro-authoritarian, pro-nationalist and above all neo-sovereigntist political movements across the West now also herald.

### **Continuation, Albeit Moderation of Obama's Post-Nationalism**

On the camp that ultimately wants to continue Obama's policies first. Obama's reading of the world does not exist in a vacuum – in fact, it resonates with deep trends in US foreign policy and military analysis. Despite the loud criticisms of Obama's persona (a persona which simply runs counter to the kind of unilateral-hegemony-traits-of-character that American commentators have conventionally expected and applauded in a president), it is indisputable that a surprisingly large part of the analytical environment in Washington, especially in the Pentagon, envisages a 21st century reality not unlike the one that has driven the Obama presidency too: complex, networked, mediatized, and defined by the increased power of publics over leaders, of boardrooms and billboards over statesmen or generals. Even the Washington think-tank environment – an environment conventionally deeply pro-US Middle Eastern engagement, and often referred to by the Obama administration as 'Arab occupied territory' – has become increasingly enamored and involved in the narrative of indirectly shaped, flexible partnerships and more hybrid forms of conflict and warfare. Hence the Pentagon's love of a book like *The Starfish and the Spider: The Power of Leaderless Organizations*, hence the widespread appraisal of lightweight academic titles such as Joseph Nye's *After Power*. Admittedly, a large part of the think-tank environment still puts its faith in more traditional forms of power and influence – and across the lane, both Obama and the light-footprint strategy have been criticized for not communicating the 'spectacle' or display of American decisiveness and preponderance.<sup>9</sup> Yet the language of subtlety, indirectness and post-sovereignty is spreading as a growing number of analysts link increased global complexity to a need for more flexible and less confrontational foreign-policy instruments.<sup>10</sup>



This also goes for Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party's 2016 presidential candidate and Secretary of State during Obama's first term. Clearly, Clinton is of a more conventional power politics tendency, and the foreign policies of her husband, President Bill Clinton, in the 1990s can rightly be viewed as a precursor of the Bush administration's neo-conservative vision of democracy exported by military means. Clinton, in other words, is no Obama II. Yet if Obama and Clinton obviously differ on some aspects of U.S. foreign policy – not least the question of Syria and the use of military force against Assad – it is also obvious that Hillary and her like-minded Democrat peers have not been insensitive to Obama's diagnosis of a less state-centered, more post-sovereign world. Her years as Secretary of State with him during the Arab Uprisings would seem to have played no small part in pushing those inclinations further – a fact which her recent memoirs, and her reflections on the role of 'smart power', or what she calls 'twitter-diplomacy', underscores. Clinton has had first-hand contact with the world of 21st-century foreign policy, and an institution like her husband's global health NGO has also taught her how enmeshed public and private, local and global agents of power now are. She understands full well that large-scale bombing or troop campaigns will get the US nowhere and that increasingly even talking the talk of supremacy or preponderance can undermine all hopes of partnership and cooperation. As Thomas Wright observantly puts the comparison with Obama, Hillary:

” Is not about large-scale invasions, as is commonly thought. Clinton is not about to send tens of thousands of ground troops to Syria. Rather, she tends to favor small-scale action early on in a conflict to tip the balance while Obama is extremely cautious about a slippery slope. Clinton also tends to see world politics more in terms of power politics, while Obama often speaks as if we are headed toward a post-national, more global system. But this all pales in comparison to fundamental questions about whether the United States ought to be engaged in the world.<sup>11</sup> ”

Here, as Wright concludes, Obama and the more Hillary-swayed part of the Democratic Party meet: both are globalist in their outlook, and both are sensitive to the hybrid forms that a global world has assumed. What Hillary and the more conventional type of Democratic Party foreign-policy position that she represents understand, however – probably better than Obama – is the communicative

dilemmas that such a world brings to an American president who wants domestic public support for costly but increasingly invisible forms of global engagement.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Obama, who has sometimes seemed disinterested in publicly explaining the rationales behind his post-sovereign policies at all, the Clinton camp of the Democratic Party understands that voters want governance they can see and touch – that publics fearful of a globalization running amok are increasingly voting for those who will promise at least the spectacle or illusion of sovereignty. It understands the dilemmas of seeking to escape the stridency of American exceptionalism on the global stage, while reassuring a domestic American audience that their government is still ‘in command’. Most likely, then, a Hillary Clinton presidency would in some shape or form have remained committed to a strategy of more subtle and indirect forms of influence, but combined this with a strategy of deliberately heralding or ‘displaying’ conventional forms of US leadership. Paradoxically, and at times probably even counter-productively, a Hillary Clinton presidency would have oscillated back and forth between such displays and the subtler world of partnered shaping.<sup>13</sup>

### **(The Return of?) Neo-Sovereigntist Nationalism?**

With a Trump presidency now a reality, however, the extent to which a Hillary Clinton presidency would have spelled a continuation of Obama’s post-sovereign form of American global engagement will remain speculation. The Democratic Party is now on its way out of the White House, and a Republican President is on his way in. This does not mean a return to the kind of neo-conservative interventionism that defined the Bush administration. Trump has vowed to replace what he perceives Obama’s weak and apologetic policies with ‘strength’. By that, Trump does not mean classical interventionist leadership. Rather, he means having the guts to check out of world politics – to cut the US loose from the parasites that feed on America’s goodwill, to drop the naïve faith in multilateral order-building, to turn the gaze towards America’s domestic problems and to solve the occasional security hassle (such as IS) through the swift and unrestrained use of military power. In many ways, ‘strength’ to him means an (illusory) return to the vigilant, self-dependent and militant policies of nineteenth-century zero-sum nationalism.<sup>14</sup>

The fact is that a very large part of the American public now thinks of the world as a place that is both disinterested in and incapable of peace, of Europe and the Middle East as little more than parasites on American resources and of American leadership as nothing but a pretty name for the US getting exploited (or in Trump’s nonsense language, ‘screwed’). Despite differences in tone and degree, the most

prominent candidates in the 2016 republican primaries all offered versions of this nationalist-isolationist tendency. That the most ardent voice of this new nationalism, Donald Trump, ended up winning not only the Republican nomination but the national election as well reveals just how impossible it has been to explain or communicate Obama's approach to power, and that a very large part of the US population, Democrats as well as Republicans, now long for a president who will display at least the posture of conventional national sovereignty.

What this growing base thinks of American leadership is not in the least bit difficult to predict: it wants none of it. As almost all observers of American public discourse agree, the sentiments of skepticism, disappointment and fear that explain the support for both Trumpism and, for that matter, Bernie Sanders' more socialist version of nationalism runs deep, deeper than anyone foresaw a decade ago. That perspective is now about to take over the Pentagon and White House, which is why the US is likely to step down from its role as facilitator or broker in the Middle East. That does not necessarily mean leaving the Middle East, nor abandoning the US commitment to military interventionism. But a Trump presidency is likely to focus solely on terror and IS, and to use that struggle as a means of communicating 'strength', control, 'sovereignty', while leaving open the question not just of progress and peace in the Middle East, but of order at all, to its own fate. American nationalism will hit harder, using a bigger hammer. But it will care less, and it won't clean up its mess.

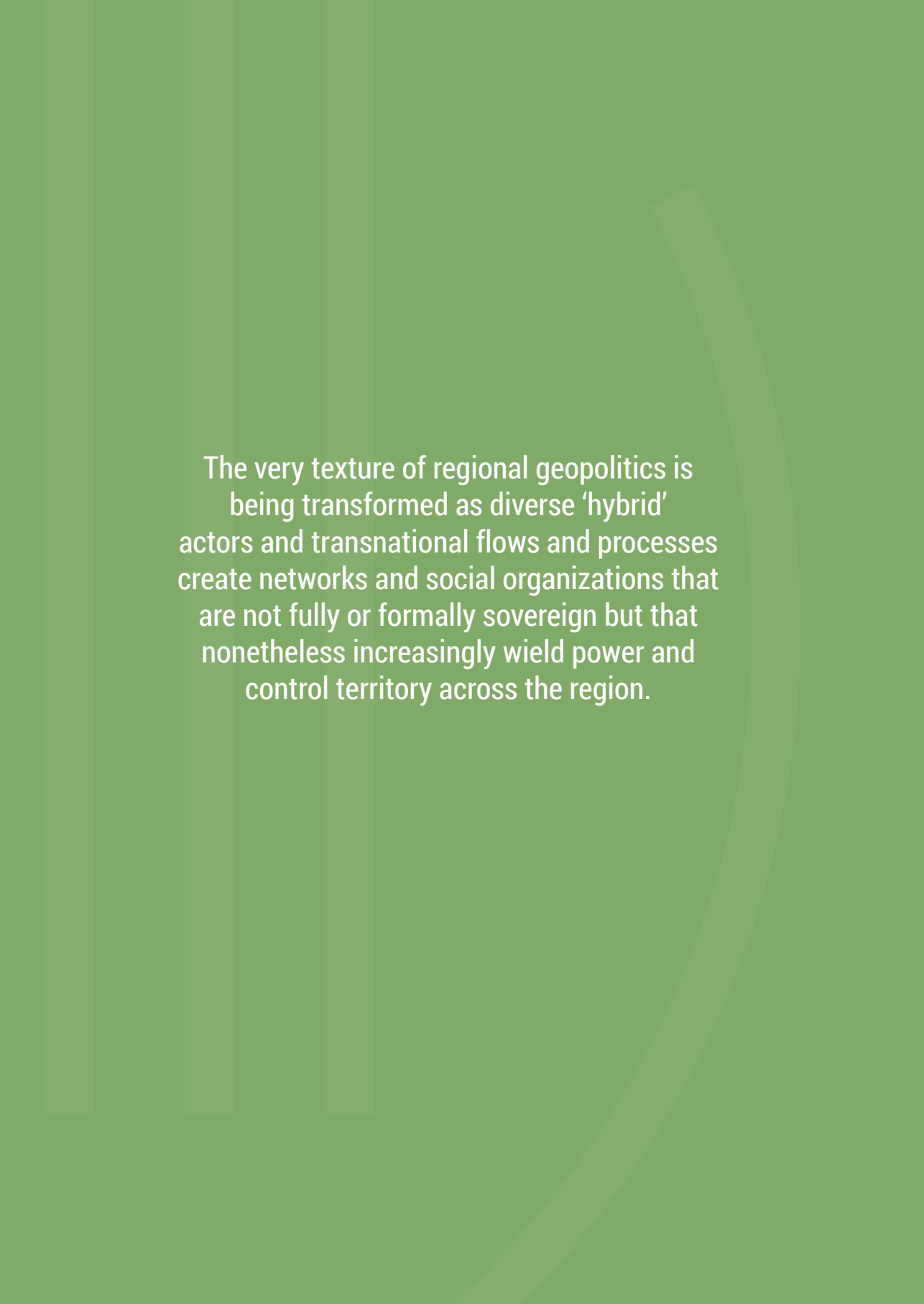
## **CONCLUSION: IS AMERICA'S FUTURE NON-INTERVENTIONIST?**

In the post-Obama era, in other words, we are most likely left with two very different visions of US foreign policy in the Middle East. On the one hand, we have a back-to-the-Washington-playbook-but-combined-with-partnered-networked-and-hybrid-forms-of-power scenario. Not just Hillary Clinton, but most of the DC think-tank environment embody this scenario, and while it may at present seem like a scenario with more back-to-the-playbook than post-sovereign components, even the more conventional establishment figures are likely to jump on board Obama's post-sovereign boat down the line. This is not because Obama's policies have been that successful, but because all the facts on the ground – as Hazbun, Crone and Andersen too conclude in this volume – point in the same direction: the complexity of contemporary social, political and military dynamics in the Middle East simply is ungovernable. In other words, even if the Hillary Clintons of our day have great

nostalgia for the world of 'multilateral statesmanship' that made up the core of the liberal world order, discretion, subtlety, indirectness and patience are more likely to become their most favored instruments eventually. From this camp – which with the election of Trump has been pushed to the margins – we should not expect calls for a return to the neo-con moment in US Middle Eastern policies. Rather, we should expect more of the muddy, evasive and special-operations-centered muddling through that has been put in place in the past decade (again, see Andersen for a similar conclusion).

Arguably, though, it is these increasingly subtle, silent and evasive post-sovereign practices that have now put Donald Trump in the White House. For most of 2016, not just Trump, but political figures across the West have been promising populations a return to classical, hierarchical and statesman-centered decision-making. Western publics have embraced these promises, however unlikely their claims to impact, power and control may be. With their national and sovereigntist declarations, these promises may sound like isolationism and hence as an ambition to actually and truly retreat from the Middle East. That is not what they are about, however. The new or 'neo-sovereign' voices in US politics ultimately seem well aware that the claim to exert control or governability is an illusion. But even while plugging into the post-factual theatrics of mediatized democracy, they nevertheless seem bent on simulating such control. It will not be neo-con democracy-building, but it won't be restrained isolationism either. More likely, it will be militarized counter-terrorist interventions, plotted to create the most visible and theatrical impression of American power and control. Not liberal or humanitarian interventionism, but attempts at classical geopolitical power demonstrations, adopted more for purposes of communicating continued sovereignty or control to an American domestic public than because a Trump administration actually believes that the world is still a 'governable' or 'moldable' place. Two trends, then – the push for discrete and indirect forms of 'new' power, and the nostalgic and often theatrical adoption of 'old' ones – now inhabit US foreign-policy thinking. The latter will now move into the White House, but the former is still present and expanding in DC think tanks and Democratic as well as Republican foreign-policy environments. Understanding both these trends and the intricate dynamics between them will be vital to grasping US engagement with the Middle Eastern region in the decade to come. Most likely, it is on the turf between them that the near future of US foreign policy will play itself out.

- 1 This chapter was completed in November 2016.
- 2 Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008); Charles A. Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 3 Stephen Walt, 'The End of the American Era', *The National Interest*, Nov/Dec, 2011, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/article/the-end-the-american-era-6037>.
- 4 Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2008).
- 5 D. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2012), 32.
- 6 Gary Sick, 'A Plague of Black Swans in the Middle East', *LobeLog Foreign Policy*, February 24, 2016, 3, available at <http://LobeLog.com/a-plague-of-black-swans-in-the-middle-east/>.
- 7 Guillaume Beaurpere, 'Waging Special Warfare in Africa', *Special Warfare*, Vol. 26, issue 1 (2013).
- 8 Tamara Cofman Wittes, 'The Slipperiest Slope of Them All', *The Atlantic*, March 12, 2016, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/obama-doctrine-goldberg-inaction/473520/>.
- 9 Leon Wieseltier, 'Welcome to the Era of Light Footprints: Obama Finally Finds his Doctrine', *The New Republic*, January 29, 2013, available at <https://newrepublic.com/article/112205/obama-doctrine-light-footprint-lightweight-thinking>.
- 10 See, for instance, Fernando M. Luján, *Light Footprints: The Future of American Military Intervention*, Report (Washington D.C: Center for a New American Security, 2013).
- 11 Thomas Wright, 'Sanders' Great Leap Inward: What his rejection of Obama's worldview means for US foreign policy'. Brookings comment, February 26, 2016, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/02/26/sanders-great-leap-inward-what-his-rejection-of-obamas-worldview-means-for-u-s-foreign-policy/>.
- 12 M. Lynch, 'Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role', *Foreign Affairs* (September/October, 2015), 1.
- 13 J. Traub, 'Hillary Clinton's Foreign Policy Doctrine', *Foreign Policy*, November, 2015.
- 14 T. Wright, 'Trump's 19th century foreign policy', *Politico*, January 20, 2016, available at <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-foreign-policy-213546>.

The background is a solid green color. It features several vertical stripes of varying shades of green, creating a textured effect. A large, thin, curved line in a lighter shade of green sweeps across the right side of the image, starting from the top and curving downwards.

The very texture of regional geopolitics is  
being transformed as diverse 'hybrid'  
actors and transnational flows and processes  
create networks and social organizations that  
are not fully or formally sovereign but that  
nonetheless increasingly wield power and  
control territory across the region.

**Beyond the American Era in the Middle East**

# **AN EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF TURBULENCE**

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**By Waleed Hazbun**

The Arab Uprisings, together with their repression and the wars that followed, mark the decline of the 'American era' in the Middle East. That era began with the rise of US political and military dominance following the 1990-1 Gulf War and represents a time when the US maintained strong influence and leverage over patterns of change and made efforts to shape a pro-US regional order. This chapter sketches aspects of the emerging next phase, when the US will not disappear from the Middle East but be forced to operate with diminished leverage in an increasingly unstable and complex political and security landscape. Rather than emphasizing the role of Islamic State (IS) or Iran as threats, I argue that the most difficult challenge the US will face is the erosion of state governance and capacity across the region and the rise of 'hybrid' actors with semi-sovereign authority over territory and military capabilities. The rise of these challenges pre-dates the uprisings. They have helped to erode US hegemony, most notably as a consequence of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. US policy under President Barack Obama struggled to accommodate these changes along with the consequences of the uprisings, resulting in the end of the US occupation of Iraq and a reluctance to initiate large-scale military intervention in Syria. Meanwhile, the apparent US military 'retreat' from the Middle East seems to have been matched by the increased assertiveness of local actors, including traditional US allies, but also more aggressive intervention by regional and external powers.

While many have suggested that the next US administration will likely attempt a swing back to increased assertiveness in the Middle East, I want to argue that any expanded engagement will be unlikely able to reestablish the political leverage the US sustained during its period of regional hegemony in the 1990s due to the erosion of state capacities of governance and the increasing assertiveness of a multiplicity of regional state and non-state actors. This chapter outlines how the very texture of regional geopolitics is being transformed as diverse 'hybrid' actors and transnational flows and processes create networks and social organizations that are not fully or formally sovereign but that nonetheless increasingly wield power and control territory across the region.

Rather than help consolidate the power of regional states, US military and counter-terrorism efforts have played a similar game to those of rival actors in the region including militias, terrorist networks, and military and intelligence units, by seeking to foster and wield influence over hybrid actors and networks. With both rival and allied states similarly seeking to influence and control rival networks, the result is a turbulent regional system in which state interests are often hard to discern and shift in complex ways. Thus in the new post-American era, regardless of its degree of intervention, the US will likely operate with limited political leverage and a reduced capacity to achieve its goals.

## **AFTER THE AMERICAN ERA: THE OBAMA DOCTRINE**

The period of the 'American era' in the Middle East, roughly from 1990 to 2005, consisted of two phases. First, in the 1990s under President Bill Clinton, the US attempted to create a region of states aligned with the US, at peace with Israel, and better integrated into the global economy. Following the failure of this effort, beginning with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the US under President George W. Bush attempted to transform the region through a 'forward strategy of freedom' based on the deployment of military force and so-called democracy promotion efforts. While the US intervened across the region with little counter-balancing from external rivals, American efforts were challenged by state and societal resistance in the region, most notably from the Iran-centered 'axis of resistance' that included Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah, but also from the rise of insurgencies in Iraq. The effort to establish a pro-US order was also undone by the contradictions inherent in the policies and principles that the US promoted in its efforts to construct a Pax



Americana. On the one hand, the US developed plans for economic reform and electoral democracy while attempting to negotiate settlements to regional conflicts. On the other hand, it vastly expanded its projection of military force and tolerated highly authoritarian and repressive regimes as allies while failing to provide security for Arab populations.

President Obama came into office with an awareness of these growing contradictions and resistance, but committed to maintaining traditional US interests in the region including, supporting the security of its Arab Gulf allies and Israel, preventing hostile powers from gaining nuclear weapons, and combating what the US defined as terrorism and terrorist groups. The Obama administration's initial response to the Arab uprisings sought to redefine the American rationale for its continuing diplomatic and military presence in the region by seeking to accommodate the toppling of US allies and the rise of democratic and Islamist forces. But doing so in this context of volatile change proved difficult. By coming to terms with the popular 2011 uprising against longtime US ally Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and recognizing as legitimate the election of Muhammad Mursi in 2012, the US alienated both Egyptian liberals and its traditional conservative allies like Saudi Arabia. US policy was further confused in attempting to react to the 2013 ouster of Mursi's fledgling government and the unyielding repression of the Muslim Brotherhood led by the Saudi-backed Egyptian army chief, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

The short-lived American aspiration to integrate an Arab world transitioning to democracy more closely into the liberal international order soon collapsed. When the US agreed to intervene in Libya in 2011, it aspired to assist the emergence of a new order, but instead opened the door to state collapse and civil war. More broadly, US policy during the Arab uprisings did little to stem regional conflicts and the rise of counter-revolutionary forces from among both its allies and its rivals. The US began experiencing a divergence of interests from its traditional allies and losing what remained of its political influence and leverage. After the first wave of uprisings, when Islamists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood came to dominate politics in Egypt and Tunisia, the rising regional powers of Qatar and Turkey sought to expand their influence by identifying with and supporting these Islamist democrats. This effort soon faltered as the Islamist parties failed to establish stable political orders: in Tunisia they faced electoral setbacks and in Egypt a military-backed coup. Soon an authoritarian-conservative counter-movement led by Saudi Arabia, which feared both popular political mobilization and the growth of Iran's regional influence,

used its economic wealth and foreign-supplied military power to brutally repress the uprising in Bahrain, broker a leadership change in Yemen, bankroll the military takeover in Egypt, and arm rebels in Libya and Syria. Meanwhile, the Syrian regime's brutal repression of the uprising against it, aided by Iran and Hezbollah, help spawn the region's most disastrous political and humanitarian crises.

As the US came to recognize its declining leverage, Obama sought to 'right-size' the US role in the region by limiting its expectations while remaining engaged. As Marc Lynch explains, this policy included reducing its military footprint and material presence while 'exercising restraint diplomatically, stepping back and challenging allies to take greater responsibility for their own security.'<sup>1</sup> This right-sizing sought to avoid the aggressive interventionist policies advocated by liberal internationalists and neoconservatives, who blame inaction by the Obama administration for the ongoing regional upheaval caused by the civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Iraq. But this policy also rejected the more cautious restraint from military involvement promoted by many neo-realists and libertarians.<sup>2</sup>

US policy recognized some of the limits of US capacities, most notably reflected in Obama's tepid backing of the armed opposition in Syria and reluctance to bomb Syria following the 2012 crossing of his self-declared 'red line' against chemical weapons being used. At the same time, the US has remained engaged in the region, launching negotiations with Iran, vastly expanding its arms deals with its allies, and engaging in a range of military interventions they hoped would open the door to political settlements of the ongoing conflicts. While avoiding 'another Middle East war,' these interventions include assisting the Saudi-led war in Yemen, low-key support for the rebels in Syria, engaging in cyber warfare against Iran, and launching a planned multi-year aerial bombing campaign against IS in Syria and Iraq.

Obama's approach to the Middle East highlights the seeming paradox of the decline of American political leverage while the US continues to deploy considerable political, military and financial resources in the region. Most prominent critics of Obama's Middle East policy within Washington policy and think-tank circles, including many within the State Department, have blamed the decline of leverage on Obama's unwillingness to use or even threaten the use of force. These critics, for example, have urged Obama to take more aggressive military action in Syria against both the Assad regime and IS. In contrast, former Obama administration officials Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson justify Obama's caution, as they have come to recognize that 'Political and economic developments in the Middle East have

reduced the opportunities for effective American intervention to a vanishing point.<sup>13</sup> Simon and Stevenson recognize that shifting national interests, as well as changing dynamics below the level of the state, have eroded US political leverage in the region. They suggest that access to domestic energy resources has reduced the strategic value of Arab Gulf allies just as the regional interests of longstanding US allies are shifting. For example, several Gulf allies have backed armed Sunni jihadist organizations opposed to the Syria regime, while the US has sought to contain these groups. The US has directed its resources to opposing IS and negotiating with Iran, while its Gulf allies are focused on bringing down the Syrian regime and countering Iranian regional influence. Simon and Stevenson, like other observers, read the decline of US political leverage as a product, in part, of the incapacity of Arab states to take steps towards democratic reform, while they see these regimes as no longer run by elites with pro-US sentiments but often with rival ambitions for influence in the region. More broadly, the authors end up supporting policies similar to those of neo-realist scholars calling for a return to 'offshore balancing', where the US intervenes only when more narrowly defined US interests are under threat. This perspective suggests that, with limited US intervention, regional actors will be forced to accommodate regional rivals, resulting in a more stable regional balance of power, with no state capable of acquiring hegemony.

However, this view also misreads the dynamics of regional politics by suggesting that the US can return to state-centered policies to gain leverage against non-state and sub-state actors. The Iran deal is often read in this way as an agreement between states that might lead to cooperation in support of efforts to bring order to the region by, for example, eliminating IS, ending the civil war in Syria and consolidating Iraqi state control over its territory. More broadly, US policies, from the backing of repressive regimes to the deployment of military forces, are also often viewed as directed at containing non-state actors and transnational networks in an effort to reestablish state power and sovereignty over territories. In contrast, I want to suggest that US policy has responded to its decline in political leverage by deploying new tools and techniques to foster and wield influence over hybrid actors and networks by, for example, supporting diverse militias and the flows of arms and intelligence that sustain them (see also Tjalve in this volume). Meanwhile, US military power and modes of engagement with the region have been reconfigured to match the networked and self-organizing patterns of these emerging forces. With both rival and allied states similarly seeking to influence and control rival networks, the result is a turbulent regional system in which state interests are often hard to discern and shift in complex ways.

## TOWARDS A GEOPOLITICS OF TURBULENCE

Drawing insights from James Rosenau's theory of turbulence in global politics, I suggest that the end of the American era should be viewed as part of a broader trend of the declining political and economic control of societies by states in the Middle East and the increasing power of non-state and transnational actors and processes. Rosenau's theory of turbulence was developed towards the end of the Cold War to suggest how processes of change are often driven by the increasing capacities of individuals and local actors to create new self-organizing networks and movements that can shape politics outside the structure of the sovereign state political order at both the sub-state and transnational levels.<sup>4</sup>

Turbulence is a product of global politics being transformed by simultaneous developments at multiple scales and levels. At the micro level, while technological changes increase the abilities of individuals to engage in collective social mobilization, the capacity and authority of states is being eroded by their failures to provide order, well-being and security for their populations. Such trends have developed in the Middle East during recent decades with social and informal sector responses to the shift from statist to neoliberal economic policies and more repressive authoritarianism. They blossomed during the Arab uprisings, as democratic activists and followers of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as Salafi networks and, eventually, the extremists of IS, developed their own political maps and imaginary futures outside the authority structures of existing regimes, whose legitimacy have been deeply eroded.

Most critically for the region, as Barry Posen recognizes, one aspect of the 'diffusion of power' has included military capacity.<sup>5</sup> The spread of the ability to buy or manufacture low-tech weapons, the diffusion of military expertise outside state-regulated forces and increased access to networks of communication, transportation and trade have enabled even the smallest militant groups and insurgencies to challenge state authorities and secure their local communities. The process of state erosion and territorial fragmentation, previously found during the 1990s in places like northern Iraq and southern Lebanon, vastly expanded in the early 2000s with the US invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan and Israel's policies towards the Palestinian territories. In these cases, the projection of military power and efforts to administer an occupation helped to generate new networks of resistance by armed militias, transnational terrorist groups and underground insurgencies. These dynamics have expanded with the militarization of the uprisings, leading to the fragmentation of territorial control not only in Syria, Iraq and Libya, but also parts of Egypt, Palestine and Lebanon.

At the center of the erosion of state authority by both political and military means is the development of 'hybrid' actors with semi-sovereign authority over territory and military capabilities. Hybrid actors create networks and social organizations that are not fully or formally sovereign but that increasingly wield power and control territory. Hybrid actors and networks often emerge from non-state actors, but they can also develop from state-affiliated actors (like popular militias) that come to operate outside the direct hierarchical control of the central state. Hybrid actors, from Hizballah and Hamas to the Kurdish Peshmerga, the Sadrist movement and other Iraqi militias, have come to define trends in Middle East politics in this era of 'chaos.' As Mark LeVine highlighted a decade ago, such movements eschew the goals of national liberation movements or of revolutionaries seeking to capture the state and instead have developed new sorts of semi-sovereign authority.<sup>6</sup>

At the regional level, with the retreat of the US and the containment of the core regional states that have historically defined statist geopolitics in the Middle East – Egypt, Syria and Iraq – rising regional powers like Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Iran are playing increasingly important roles in regional politics. But while states remain key actors, both regional and external states have sought to advance their interests by backing hybrid actors, such as political parties and militias, and directing transnational flows of funds, arms and intelligence. With the breakdown in state order in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya, these hybrid actors, including rebel forces and IS, have come to play central roles in regional politics which external powers like the US have limited capabilities to control. The impact of these trends is also felt across borders in Turkey, Jordan and even, through refugee flows, across Europe.

The role of hybrid actors and the declining authority of states is evident in the rise of a regional struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which was first termed a 'new Arab Cold War' in the mid-2000s.<sup>7</sup> By 2014, the sectarian-tinged geopolitical struggle between these Saudi-led forces and Iran's allies in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon had emerged as the defining feature of regional politics, displacing the Arab-Israel conflict as a main axis. Regimes and political forces invoked increasingly sectarian language to mobilize populations by refocusing their insecurities away from socio-economic conditions and the lack of political rights. But as Gregory Gause explains, 'It is the weakening of Arab states...that has created the battlefields of the new Middle East cold war.'<sup>8</sup> This endemic societal insecurity, made only worse by foreign intervention across the region, is what has provided the basis for the rise of non-state and hybrid actors seeking to carve out their own spaces of sovereignty and security even as they gain backing and support from regional and external states.

Drawing on the notion of turbulence offers guidance to explain why the capacities of states in the region, even as they become more ruthlessly authoritarian and deploy more deadly military power, are declining in the face of the increased agency and authority of non-state and hybrid actors. Too often the seeming 'chaos' of regional conflict, state collapse, and civil wars in the Middle East are viewed in particularistic, even primordial terms. What might be particular about the Middle East is the frequency of efforts of regional regimes and external powers to try to use military force to uphold or re-impose a decaying order, as the US did with the Iraq war 2003 and the British and French in Suez War of 1956. As Posen observes about US policy in the post-Cold War era, 'the very act of seeking more control injects negative energy into global politics as quickly as it finds enemies to vanquish.'<sup>9</sup> The US and its allies, as previous rulers of the region, have also resisted inclusive, democratic modes for developing alternative structures of authority. Just when the uprisings suggested new possibilities for crafting alternative systems of governance, the counter-revolution led by longstanding US allies and their rivals cut off such an avenue for change.

## **RETHINKING THE DYNAMICS OF US–MIDDLE EAST INTERCONNECTEDNESS**

The election of a new US president in 2016 will likely lead to a shift back to a more interventionist American approach to the Middle East, but any US leader will face similar structural challenges defined by the declining ability of state actors in the Middle East, which has been eroded by the increasing power of more diverse hybrid actors. At the same time, the value of traditional core US interests as a guide to policy, such as protecting the security of traditional allies and the flow of oil, will continue to be contested both within and beyond Washington policy circles.

Under Obama, one way that the US has accommodated rising turbulence has been to develop new organizational structures in the deployment of US power. Often unnoticed in the shift towards a 'light footprint' military posture is the fact that the reconfiguration of US power projection from large land- and sea-based military forces has not diminished US engagement. Rather, the US has developed its scope and intensity, but in less visible and politically accountable ways (see also the essays by Crone, Tjalves and Pison Hindawi in this collection).

As Steve Niva explains, these new organizational structures in the US military evolved from the ground-up by US forces fighting on the frontlines of the 'war on terror' in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>10</sup> In the process, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) evolved as an organizational hub for US commands and agencies to develop new networked forms of military operations. These include the use of small units of elite special forces, reliance on high-tech operations using drones, electronic tracking and cyber warfare, and closer military-to-military cooperation with often US-trained forces in the region. This evolving form of networked warfare mirrors the networked forms of self-organized militias and fighters that have come to control large areas of Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya.

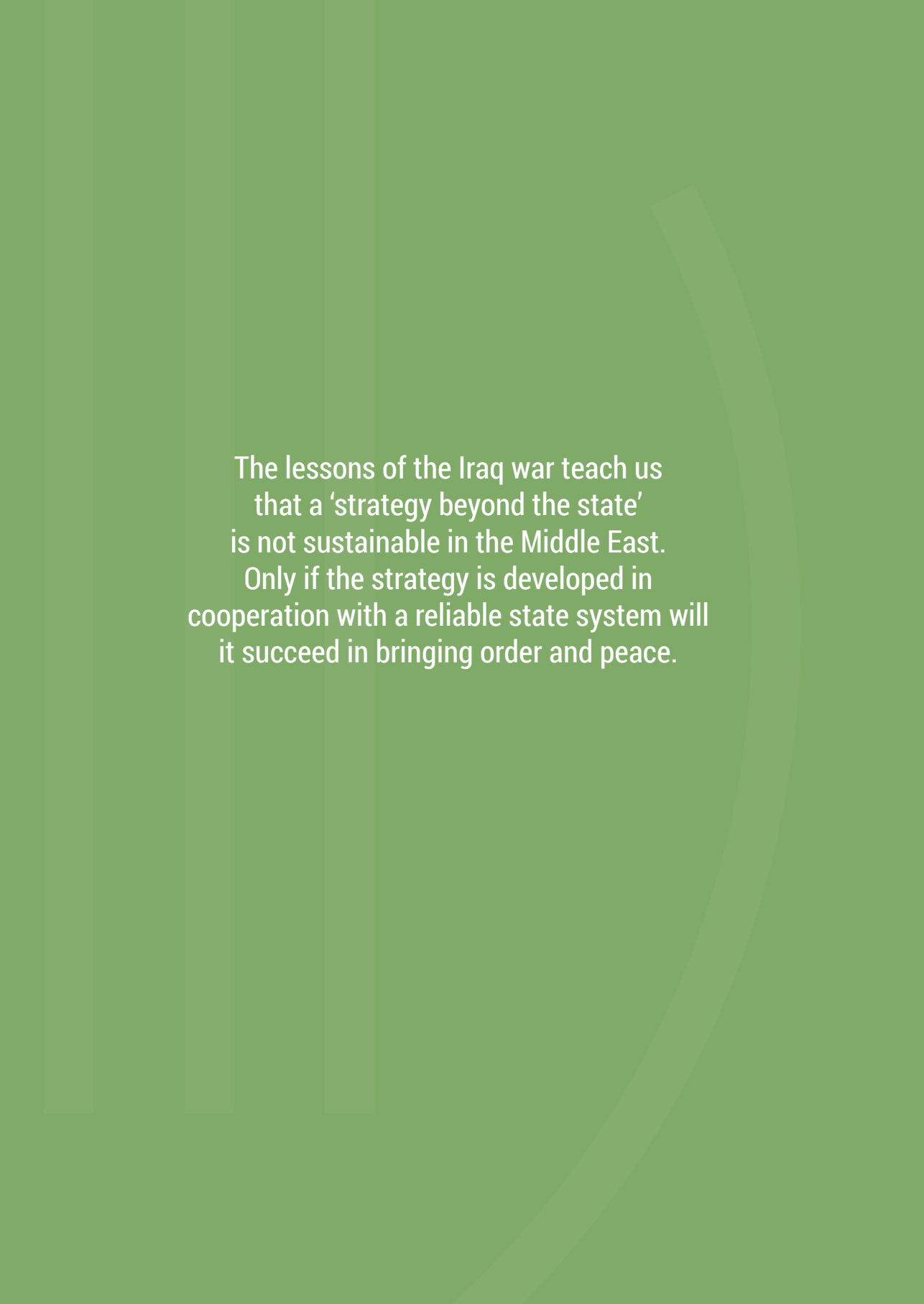
As a result, many US forces operate within a largely autonomous command structure while engaging in a shadow war of targeted killing that 'resembles a global and possibly permanent policing operation in which targeted operations are used to manage populations and threats in lieu of addressing the social and political problems that produce the threats in the first place.'<sup>11</sup> Within this system, units have increased operational autonomy to locate, target and strike. As war comes to consist more of night raids and drone strikes, Niva argues that US military violence increasingly disappears from media coverage and political accountability. The US campaign against IS is largely an extension of such existing operations, allowing the US military to set up covert assistance and bombing operations in Iraq and Syria that are nevertheless generally viewed as something short of leading the US into another Middle East war. The continuing post-uprisings deployments of US military power in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere accommodates the decline of US popular support for American wars in the Middle East and uncertainty about core strategic interests, but it has also resulted in a form of perpetual warfare. These ongoing engagements often maintain forms of political and security interdependence between the US and regional allies while remaining disconnected from political processes in both the US and the Middle East. At the same time, even as Obama resisted options for expanded military intervention in Syria, many forms of American engagement in the region were directed through processes that are steps removed from daily White House policy-making but involve processes that are often funded, assisted and/or approved by the US government. These include arms exports to the region and assistance provided by private contractors and non-governmental organizations, as well as a lobby, think-tanks and public relations firms often staffed by Americans, including former US government officials.

Meanwhile, the politics of fear has increasingly defined the US foreign-policy discourse. US policy in the Middle East has long been framed around rare critical events that, through their affective force, have had powerful impacts on policy-makers and US policy. These events include the 1973 'oil crisis,' airplane hijackings, the US hostage crisis in Iran, and the attacks on US embassy and marine barracks in Beirut. The impact of 9/11 is now well recognized, but like these past events, 9/11 should be understood as another instance of an abnormal event that led to the reshaping of US strategy while ignoring the negative impacts of past US policies. The most recent examples include the rise of IS and the global refugee crisis, in which public opinion and the US foreign-policy discourse have been shaped by horrifying, now iconic images, and myths about refugees as security threats. Both, however, are directly a consequence of the war in Syria and the patterns of territorial state fragmentation discussed above. They are symptoms of systemic problems, not of new, exogenously produced crises. The current challenge is defined by the question of how to respond to the disastrous humanitarian consequences of these developments while the US capacity to shape outcomes and resolve crises remains limited. The Obama administration resisted calls for military intervention against the regime of Bashar Assad in Syria largely due to a recognition of limited US leverage, the lack of clear strategic rationale and the risks of escalation, but the US cannot insulate itself from the expanding effects of the ongoing crisis.

While Obama's Middle East policy came to recognize the limited US capacity for imposing change, broad discussions of US policy towards the Middle East in the media, government policy circles and Washington think-tanks generally fail to fully recognize and accept the dynamics of turbulence, the erosion of existing forms of authority and the self-organized agency of both state and sub-state actors in the region. Throughout all this, many American policy-makers have maintained a self-image of the US as an indispensable nation unable to retreat from the region and one that is needed to provide a vision and leadership for the international community to deal with the supposed threats that emanate from the region. The result is that, while US leverage declines, between its 'new cartography of networked warfare,' transnational interdependences, self-identity and fears of terrorism, the US remains deeply engaged. American links cannot be severed, nor can these processes be centrally controlled and managed. Rather, we need to re-conceive US-Middle East relations not as interactions between discrete entities, but as a turbulent set of interconnected systems and processes that encompasses both.



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- 9 Posen, 'The Case for Restraint,' 13.
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- 11 Steve Niva, 'Disappearing Violence,' 199.



The lessons of the Iraq war teach us  
that a 'strategy beyond the state'  
is not sustainable in the Middle East.  
Only if the strategy is developed in  
cooperation with a reliable state system will  
it succeed in bringing order and peace.

## **Fighting Islamic State**

# **LEARNING FROM HISTORY SECURITY BEYOND THE STATE**

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**By Lars Erslev Andersen**

Fifteen years after the George W. Bush administration initiated the War on Terror, the USA is still looking for the right strategy. As Vibeke Schou Tjalve argues in this volume, President Barack Obama is not prepared to let the USA get involved in new big wars in the Middle East because the region has turned into a post-sovereign zone tormented by sectarian transnational conflicts. During his term, the US has nevertheless intervened in the region. Since 2014, a lower number of ground troops (advisors, special forces) have been deployed to Iraq and Syria, where in August and September Obama ordered an air campaign against IS. However, the intervention has been criticized for not having a vision for solving the conflicts in the Middle East, a region that apparently has its own uncanny autonomy when it comes to uncontrollable security dynamics. Thus on the one hand military intervention in the Middle East seems to be an unavoidable precondition for US security policy, while on the other hand regional autonomy, coupled with a complicated international political climate, has so far hindered a sustainable intervention strategy being developed. A look at earlier interventions in the Middle East might give us some hints regarding what the present strategy is lacking. That will only work, of course, if we have a proper understanding of what worked and what did not work in former interventions and strategies. For instance, during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan there was a lot of talk about 'hearts and minds', though that played in a minor role in reducing the conflict and violence compared to what mattered, namely providing security for the local population and the militias. In Iraq, the counterinsurgency strategy (COIN) succeeded in reducing violence between the different groups as long as US provided the security. However, this was done without the cooperation of

the Iraqi government, and as soon as the US departed, leaving a security vacuum after the withdrawal of combat troops in 2011, sectarian violence again increased to the level of a civil war. This indicates that COIN only works as long as security is guaranteed either by an intervention force or by the local state. Strategies beyond the state might lead to an initial decrease in violence, but not to sustainable conflict-resolution and peace-building.

## THE STRATEGY

The present strategy being conducted by the US-led coalition against IS seems to be based on US lessons in Afghanistan and especially Iraq during the 'surge' from 2007 to 2011, when Obama withdrew American combat troops from Iraq. In Anbar province in Iraq, a shift in US strategy, apparently from 2007 onwards, led to a substantial reduction in violence. What seemed to have worked in Anbar province was the counterinsurgency strategy (COIN). This consisted of deploying more troops, primarily to protect local civilians rather than hunting the insurgents, engaging the soldiers with the local population instead of hiding them behind the fences of highly defended military camps, and giving tribal leaders political recognition by allowing them to organize militias which were offered training, logistical support, weapons and salaries by the US Army. The narrative of the COIN strategy invented new tropes in strategic military language, like 'Human Terrain' and 'Hearts and Minds', and it emphasized 'Culture' as an important issue in the interplay between the US Army and the local population. This 'culturalistic' orientalist approach strengthened sectarianism rather than provided political representation for all ethnic and religious groups, which the narrative claimed to be its goal. The COIN strategy consisted of two aspects working together, namely the surge or increase in the amount of combat troops on the ground, and the building up of local militias to take over the hunting down and defeat of the enemy, which at that time were the al-Qaeda terrorists.<sup>1</sup>

In the war against IS, the US strategy has more or less been building on experiences from the COIN strategy, with two major differences. First, in Syria the practice of 'boots on the ground' has been replaced by a heavy air campaign, while in Iraq the US and its coalition allies have concentrated on supporting Kurdish security troops (Peshmerga) in the north and the Iraqi army in the west outside Baghdad and Tikrit by providing them with training and air support. Secondly, the international containment of IS has been sanctioned by UN Security Resolution No. 2178 (2014), with the aim of imposing a blockade on IS recruiters and goods, including money and

weapons, and on entering IS territory, while at the same time stopping IS from exporting oil on to the black market. The idea behind the strategy is to deprive IS of resources, thus weakening its strength on the battlefield, and at the same time depriving it of the capacity to keep its promises to build up an Islamic state in order to encourage the fragmentation of IS from the inside. In the meantime the Iraqi army, the Peshmerga and Syrian opposition groups would have been building themselves up to be able to defeating IS and provide order and security for local populations, both civilians and IS defectors. In other words, the strategy has been one of supporting these groups in defeating IS by building up local armies and militias, providing them with training and equipment, containing IS through air support and hoping IS will experience internal fragmentation. In the present chapter, however, we will examine this military strategy by discussing what worked and what did not work about COIN as implemented by the US in Iraq from 2007.

## THE INSURGENTS

The downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime was followed by an insurgency involving both secular-nationalist-oriented groups and Sunni as well as Shia Muslim networks. In 2007, a ceasefire was broken by the Shia militias both internally and between themselves and the government. During and after the surge in 2007, there was a significant decline in Sunni Muslim-based insurgent activities, but in 2012 the Sunni Muslim insurgency escalated again in a way that, in terms of violence, led to 2013 and 2014 reaching similar levels of insurgent activity as in 2007 and 2008. In June 2014, a full-blown civil war was again a reality in Iraq. In 2015 the Iraqi army, Shia Muslims militias and the Peshmerga (Kurdish security forces), supported by Iranian Revolutionary Guards and a coalition of forty states providing air support, training, weapons and equipment to the Iraqi army and the Peshmerga, were fighting this 'reborn' Sunni Muslim insurgency headed and organized by IS.

The emergence of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) can be dated back to 2004, when the Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's group al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (Unity and Holy War) formally became affiliated with al-Qaeda. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi became known for his brutality, partly through terrifying videos showing decapitations of hostages, a method of killing uncannily resembling the acts of violence being committed today by IS. However, such videos, and the executions they depict, were not only targeted at an external audience: they were also part of a larger systematic effort by this group to spark a civil war between Sunni and Shia Muslims. To begin with al-Zarqawi was not an al-Qaeda member, and indeed the al-Qaeda leadership

grew critical of both his brutality and his attacks on Shia Muslims, holding the view that such attacks should be aimed at the Americans and the new Iraqi government instead. Nonetheless, al-Zarqawi's group – under the name of the al-Qaeda Committee for Jihad in Mesopotamia – was officially incorporated into the overall al-Qaeda network in October 2004, and this remained the case after al-Zarqawi's death.

Al-Zarqawi was killed by American forces in a targeted killing on 7 June 2006 near the city of Baquba in Iraq. The conflict between the al-Qaeda leadership and his group worsened after his death, mainly because his successor, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, swore loyalty to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, who had by then formed the group called Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). During 2006, AQI increasingly lost the legitimacy among the Iraqi population that it had won during the early stages of the war and the insurgency against the Coalition forces. At the same, the Iraqi army, which was being trained and reorganized together with Shia Muslim militias, started attacks on Sunni Muslim tribes in Anbar, putting them under increasing pressure.<sup>2</sup>

## **THE COIN STRATEGY**

Dissatisfaction with AQI grew among the Iraqi Sunni Muslims because of AQI's fundamentalist sharia regime and because local populations felt harassed by incoming AQI fighters. At the same time, local communities were worried that Iran was gaining too much influence over the government in Baghdad: Sunni tribes were under great pressure from the ISF (the Iraqi Security Forces), which were dominated by Shi'a tribes with support from Iran.<sup>3</sup> Within the context of this situation, a number of tribal leaders, later to be known as the Awakening Sheikhs (in Arabic, Sahwat al-Anbar – the Anbar Awakening – or simply Sahwa), offered to cooperate with the American troops against AQI, a promising collaboration from the US point of view that turned the Anbar Awakening into a 'model' for US counterinsurgency operations in Iraq.

Despite several offensive operations in Fallujah in 2006, which was considered the stronghold of AQI and of insurgent violence more broadly, violence increased, as did the criticism and the frustrations over the predominantly 'conventional' approach, which the US adopted towards countering the expanding insurgency. This had serious repercussions on the US home front, where the 2006 mid-term elections

were overshadowed by the Iraq War. As a reaction to the escalating violence in Iraq and the growing criticism at home, in March 2006 a number of prominent members of Congress, supported by the White House, established the Iraq Study Group or ISG. In December the ISG published its findings and recommended the withdrawal of American troops, followed by negotiations with regional players such as Syria and Iran in order to achieve broader regional support for the stabilization of Iraq. A large number of critics shared the committee's recommendations, but the Bush administration, instead of withdrawing US troops, announced the surge, which led to the deployment of five additional US Army brigades to Iraq.

## THE COIN NARRATIVE

This decision, within the context of military setbacks in Iraq and growing domestic criticism, marked the shift from a predominantly 'kinetic' military effort – in line with the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's doctrine and its general overemphasis on technology replacing manpower (Revolution Military Affairs, RMA), overwhelming firepower and attrition – towards the idea of a 'population-centric' counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> This did not come unexpectedly but was embedded within the broader renaissance of counterinsurgency during these years, most visibly in the publication of FM 3-24.<sup>5</sup> Tellingly, it was the appointment of General David Petraeus as Supreme Commander of the US Forces in Iraq by the US Senate in January 2007 that signaled the rise to power of the 'insurgent' COIN lobby within the US-military establishment. Petraeus, a 'student' of counterinsurgency and small wars who was familiar with counterinsurgency 'classics' like Mao Tse-tung's writings on guerrilla warfare and David Galula's studies of the French pacification campaigns in Indochina and Algeria, belonged to a group of soldiering intellectuals who had been lobbying for a COIN strategy. Unsurprisingly, with his appointment and George W. Bush' decision to launch the surge, Petraeus was ready to put FM 3-24's counterinsurgency 'theory' into practice. Petraeus arrived in Iraq in February 2007, where he found that the offer of the Sahwa Sheikhs fitted hand in glove with his counterinsurgency strategy. As David Kilcullen, who served as Petraeus' senior counterinsurgency advisor in 2007 and 2008, observed, the strategy included the culturally sensitive co-optation of locals by Army and Marine Corps commanders in Anbar province who 'consciously emulated the behavior patterns expected of a responsible sheikh in Iraqi tribal society, which helped gain community respect and build peer-to-peer relationships with local leaders'.<sup>6</sup>

Kilcullen's book, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, presents the Anbar Awakening as a counterinsurgency success story, as it 'led to dramatically improved security through the second half of 2007'.<sup>7</sup> The recurrent theme of his book is that straightforward 'kinetic' operations against the enemy, in this case Iraqi insurgents or terrorists, would spark still more resistance against the Iraqi army and the coalition forces. Therefore, he proposes a strategy for protecting the civilian population and strengthening local militias to allow local communities to defend themselves against and actively counter the rebels. Local communities must be convinced that the invasion forces are there to protect them, rather than merely to utilize their towns and fields for fighting insurgents. Instead of chasing the enemy, the primary task of the invasion forces should be the rebuilding of local security structures based on local traditions and relations along with the use of local militias – rather than creating an army of foreign soldiers trained by external forces – to oust 'foreign' insurgents. According to Kilcullen, the Anbar Awakening seems to be a model for this approach.

## **THE ORIENTALISM OF THE COIN NARRATIVE**

In line with this portrayal of the Anbar Awakening 'success story', then, the mission of the US forces in such counterinsurgency operations would be the training and logistical support of local forces, who know the language and geography as well as the human terrain better than external counterinsurgents and, unlike armies of invasion, are not strangers to the local population. However, beyond the immediate decline in violence, the strategy laid the foundations for a process that, in the end, would undermine exactly this success. The problem was that local communities were now flooded with weapons. During the ongoing political process of building a post-invasion Iraqi state nationally, many 'awakened' local sheikhs and Sunni militias were granted neither the promised influence in Baghdad nor the enrolment of their men into the new Iraqi army, thereby depriving them of political influence, economic benefits and opportunities for social mobilization. Thus, what had been a stabilizing factor that brought down violence in Anbar province during the years up to 2011, from that year on was increasingly transformed into a threat, where heavily armed local actors, angered by marginalization, their experience of treason and their increasing isolation in the Iraqi state and society, turned into a pool of fighters that could be recruited by an army of insurgents headed by IS.<sup>8</sup>



Some researchers and commentators have claimed that, if the Awakening Sheikhs had been given a political role and influence in the Iraqi government after the parliamentary elections in 2010, and if the Sunni militias had been enrolled into the Iraqi army, the bottom-up counterinsurgency strategy would have been a sustainable success story, prompting the peaceful integration of the Iraqi state. Following this argument, the failure in Iraq in the form of the rise of IS arose from the fact that the Iran-backed and Shia-dominated government in Baghdad did not fulfill the promises that the US had made to the Awakening Sheikhs. This, in turn, can be seen as the fault of the US for not keeping up the pressure on the Iraqi government and for withdrawing its troops too early at the end of 2011. In particular, the latter point has been the main issue for discussion within the US foreign-policy establishment since the rise of IS. The catastrophic and tragic situation in Iraq, it was argued, was not the war as such, or the COIN, but President Barack Obama's decision to withdraw US troops too early.<sup>9</sup> Following this line of thinking, the strategy for confronting IS today should therefore follow the COIN effort of the Anbar model, combined with a containment strategy: local militias on the ground confronting IS should be supported with weapons and training, logistics, intelligence and air support, while the government in Baghdad should be forced to implement an integration strategy for Sunni Muslims who oppose IS to incorporate them into the Iraqi state.

Scholars have also asked whether the COIN in Anbar actually was the success that authors like Kilcullen and others claim it was. In their study 'Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?', Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman and Jacob N. Shapiro investigate whether it was the Awakening, the surge or a combination of both that succeeded in reducing levels of violence. Moreover, they also ask whether the Anbar case has any idiosyncratic features that became necessary preconditions for the declining violence. They conclude that more ground troops alone would not have stabilized Iraq; rather, stabilization was dependent on the Awakening. Moreover, they also demonstrate that the counterinsurgency mantra of 'winning hearts and minds' in order to defeat insurgencies was irrelevant with regard to the Awakening, because there is no evidence that the '2007 turnaround occurred because some group of nonaligned civilians changed their minds and decided to support Nouri al-Maliki's government'.<sup>10</sup> This point is supported by other studies arguing that the primary reason for 'the turnaround' was the pressure and attacks on the tribes by the Iraqi army and the Shia militias. However, the most important conclusion of these and other recent studies regarding the Anbar Awakening is that the success

of counterinsurgency operations in the area and the related enlisting of 'tribal forces' were only possible because a relatively good security environment was already in place in the months before the surge.

Another point that deserves attention is the fact that the coalition strategy in support of the Anbar Awakening was driven by a kind of 'military Orientalism', in the words of the military historian Patrick Porter.<sup>11</sup> Insurgents, as well as the 'tribal' counterinsurgency proxies, are seen as exotic actors. They are framed as truly pre-modern leftovers, fixed in space and time, deeply embedded in seemingly static tribal relations, in the politics of blood and honor, and incapable of adapting to changing conditions, new technologies or (post-) modern strategic thinking. The rise of IS deconstructs such portrayals of 'tribal' (counter) insurgents as 'exotic' actors. IS's rise instead shows that the insurgent army is capable of long-term strategic planning, sophisticated use of hypermodern communications strategies and new forms of insurgent warfare that blur the boundaries between insurgency, terrorism and conventional war. Under the name of Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), IS survived the COIN, reorganized and mobilized from around 2010, and is today a well-organized insurgent army whose leadership consists of former Iraqi army officers as well as Islamic scholars like Caliph Ibrahim (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi).<sup>12</sup> Many IS warriors are locally recruited. Others are recruited abroad, primarily from the Middle East, and fewer from Western countries. Up to the capture of Mosul, IS was more or less ignored, as the group did not pose a direct threat to Western states and the international community. It was only when IS attacked Irbil, the main city of Iraqi Kurdistan, and the oil rich area around Kirkuk, that the US took IS serious, not at least because of the more than 3.000 Americans working in the area which is one of the most stable and prosperous regions of the country.<sup>13</sup> The 2014 US military campaign against IS was followed by the involvement of many other states. In September of the same year, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, IS's spokesperson, made a call to Muslims all over the world to kill 'disbelievers' as revenge for the aerial bombing campaign against IS. This call was taken up by IS sympathizers who have been engaged in terrorist attacks in the West, including the 2015 attacks in Paris.

The COIN strategy initiated during the command of General Petraeus was partly based on presuppositions, which, after closer examination, did not seem correct. The reason for local sheikhs offering to cooperate with the US Army was not a change in hearts and minds based on cultural characteristics but the need for security. As long as the US could provide this security, they cooperated in both keeping order and reducing violence. When the US left and the local population were exposed to the sectarian politics of the Iraqi state headed by the al-Maliki regime,

instead of order, the result of the strategy was the weaponization of sectarianism and increasing extremism both against the state and internally, between the awakened sheikhs and other local groups, thus providing fertile ground for IS's recruitment of fighters. A strategy based on arming local populations beyond the state thus seemed extremely risky, leading to the militarization of local communities rather than building resilient societies. With its focus on the cultural aspects and an exotic understanding of local communities as well as their enemies, the COIN strategy concealed a blind spot in interpreting the security dynamics of the situation.<sup>14</sup>

## THE PROBLEMS OF THE CURRENT STRATEGY

Reports from Syria indicate that in some respects the strategy is actually working, as numbers of IS fighters face a significant reduction at the same time as the number of defectors and fighters fleeing IS is apparently growing: signs that IS is beginning to fragment are thus being reported from different sources. Some even say that IS will be dissolved in less than a year. If that happens, it is valid to compare this situation with the almost complete defeat of al-Qaeda (in the name of Islamic State in Iraq, ISI; al-Qaeda in Iraq, AQI) because of the COIN strategy in 2010. Some points come immediately to mind:


- As in the COIN in Anbar, the strategy against IS (and al-Nusra) is being conducted beyond the state, without any binding consent from the states and their governments in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq there is still a sectarian, Iranian-supported government without any substantial signs of a willingness to integrate the Sunni Muslim population of Anbar into the Iraqi state. In other words, the problems that created al-Qaeda in Iraq in the first place and that boosted ISI from 2010 onwards will remain. In Syria the US-led coalition is not cooperating with the Syrian regime for the simple reason that it is the coalition's enemy. Thus, the strategy does not have any vision for how to stabilize the situation on the ground after the presumed defeat of IS. This 'beyond the state' approach is in serious risk of facing the same or even worse problems with sectarian conflicts and insurgency than was the case in Iraq after the US withdrawal of combat troops at the end of 2011.

- Contrary to the COIN narrative, the motive for the Sahwa movement in cooperating with the US Army in Iraq from 2007 onwards was security and the need for protection: it was not a question of 'culture' or 'hearts and minds'. Security is precisely a major problem in the current war against IS, as to date there are no security forces on the ground that can provide security to militias fighting IS and civilians: neither the Iraqi army nor the coalition is able to provide security to its allies on the ground. The training program for the so-called moderate opposition has, to put it mildly, not been a success. The support given to opposition militias in Syria in the form of weapons is in severe risk of leading to the same consequences as the COIN strategy: the weaponization of sectarianism, and increasing extremism against the state, the coalition and internally between local groups, all providing fertile ground for IS or al-Qaeda in recruiting fighters.

## IN NEED OF STATES

The obvious conclusion is that, in vast areas of Syria, there are no capable troops on the ground that can support the opposition or protect civilians from IS and the Bashar al-Assad regime. As the world already has seen, air campaigns cannot replace security forces on the ground. So far the conclusion has been that the present strategy will presumably be able to defeat IS, but it will not fundamentally change the security dynamics on the ground, thus risking turning the strategy into a Sisyphean task in which an eternal series of interventions have to be fought. The lessons of the Iraq war teach us that a strategy 'beyond the state' is not sustainable: in the Middle East, only if the strategy is developed in cooperation with a reliable state system will it succeed in bringing order and peace. As long as a developed system of states that could provide order in the region is not in place, external interventions are more at risk of opening endless and uncontrollable conflicts, rather than bringing peace and security to the region.

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Although 'independence' and 'rank' are traditional keywords in French foreign policy, today French activism abroad is becoming increasingly Americanized, regionalized and preferably performed with respect for international law.

## **French Interventionism in the Post-American MENA Region FILLING A VOID?**

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**By Manni Crone**

The recent downscaling of the US presence in the Middle East and North Africa/Sahel region (MENAS) has apparently left a space for other powers like France to assume a more active role. Since the 2011 intervention in Libya, when President Obama introduced the concept of 'leading from behind', France has on several occasions played a prominent role in the region, pushing for military involvement, primarily in North Africa/Sahel, but also on several occasions in Syria. In 2011 French jets launched airstrikes against Libya, and in January 2013 the French army intervened in Mali to counter various jihadi groups who had taken control of the north of the country. More recently, France has stepped up its presence in the Sahel with the vast 'Operation Barkhane' a 3,500 ground troop presence with no end date. And even before the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris, France had initiated bombings against Islamic State (IS), not only in Iraq but also in Syria. But how can we understand this eager French interventionism? To what extent has French foreign policy in the MENAS region been made possible by the American retreat, and is French intervention boosting or hampering regional autonomy?

The interesting question, however, is not merely whether a relative American retreat is allowing France to assume a more prominent role, but also how French interventionism is currently being rearticulated and reinvented. Given its colonial history in North Africa/Sahel and Lebanon/Syria, the latter being a French mandate until 1945, French involvement in these regions is easily perceived as 'neo-colonial'. The Algerian War of Independence from 1954 to 1962 left deep scars between the two countries. Similarly, the French mandate over Syria and the Lebanon ended in

1945 in a regular massacre, with French bombers – on de Gaulle's orders – bombing Damascus and killing around 400 people. Against this backdrop, this article focuses on the conditions under which French power can be exercised abroad and asks how French interventionism is currently being rearticulated to cope with a post-Arab Uprising situation. It appears that the conditions for French penetration in the MENAS region imply less visibility and more regional cooperation. Although 'independence' and 'rank' are traditional keywords in French foreign policy, today French activism abroad is becoming increasingly Americanized, regionalized and preferably performed with respect for international law.

### **FILLING A VOID, OR PUSHED TO THE FRONT OF THE STAGE?**

Although the Americans have scaled down their presence in the Middle East since the heyday of their intervention in Iraq, they are still present in the MENAS region in more subtle ways. Obama's 'strategic patience' (cf. Schou Tjalve, this volume) and reluctance to interfere militarily in the Middle East has probably left a space for Russia to assume a more active military role in this region. But the perceived American pull-out does not necessarily amount to a void. The American intention to 'lead from behind' has no doubt, on several occasions, allowed France to play a more prominent role, as, for instance, in the 2011 air campaign in Libya. But increased French activism is not being performed instead of the Americans, but in close collaboration with – and sometimes dependence on – the Americans. After the Second World War, independence in relation to the US was a key component in a Gaullist-inspired French foreign policy. When in 2003 France vocally criticized the American intervention in Iraq for taking place without a UN mandate, this position was perfectly in line with classical French strategic thinking, which situated France as the independent voice between the two superpowers. In 2003, France managed to stay clear of the American-led coalition in Iraq, and the country's involvement in the ISAF intervention in Afghanistan can be characterized as half-hearted. The independence of French foreign policy in the Bush years might be one reason why France is less war-fatigued than other partners who were more heavily involved in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Against this historical backdrop, it is worth noting that the perceived American retreat from the MENAS region has gone hand in hand with a French rapprochement with the US to such an extent that France – despite its proclaimed ambition to maintain military independence – today appears to depend to an extent on the US. This is rather obvious in the Middle East, where France is not filling a void after the



US for the simple reason that it is hardly in a position to do so. In contrast to Russia, which, at the invitation of the Syrian regime, has conducted bold air operations in Syria, several events have revealed the limits to independent French interventionism in this region. Although France has shown a willingness to take the initiative and play a prominent role, the country has on several occasions been driven not to the front of the stage, but into a corner.

The limits to French interventionism were made evident in 2013, when the Syrian government used chemical weapons in a Damascus suburb. President Obama had famously defined the use of chemical weapons as a 'red line', and under those conditions Francois Hollande was determined to take action against the Syrian regime as well. France, which otherwise takes great pains in respecting international law, was ready to intervene without a UN mandate, and French Mirages were already on the runway, ready to be deployed. But this French eagerness to take action in Syria was soon to hit a snag. First, a war-weary British parliament rejected the idea of engaging in yet another foreign conflict without a UN mandate, and shortly afterwards President Obama went back on his statement, thereby putting the limits of French interventionism on public display. International media attention soon coalesced around Obama's 'weakness', while the fact that France was forced to abandon its intention to take action against Bashar al Assad received less attention. But this event clearly showed that in the Middle East France is a middle power that depends on the US to intervene militarily.<sup>1</sup> The negotiations over whether and how to dismantle Syrian chemical weapons involved bilateral discussions between the US and Russia to which France was not invited. This incident revealed for all to see that France is not able to fill any void in this region: it can act with the US, but not instead of the US.

After the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2013, once again the French eagerness to intervene and take a leading role was hampered. President Hollande wanted to form a broad military coalition that could take military action against Islamic State and work for a political solution in Syria. He jumped on a plane on a diplomatic whirlwind tour, travelling to Washington, London and Russia within a few days. This diplomatic endeavor perfectly matched France's perception of itself as the independent power that is able to cooperate and make deals, not only with the US and its other NATO allies, but also with Russia. But the results were meager: other than soothing statements of intent, Obama did not see any reason to step up the American contribution, and the attempt to get Russia on board to play a more constructive role in the Syrian conflict appears at best to be an illusion.

## IS FRANCE DEPENDENT ON THE US IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL?

In the Middle East, the French are not filling the void left by the Americans for the simple reason that they are not able to do so. But what about North Africa and the Sahel, where France has been the major player for centuries? Has a change in American foreign policy under Obama any implications at all for the French presence in this region? It was in North Africa – and more precisely Libya – that the Americans for the first time applied the concept of ‘leading from behind’, which allowed France to take the initiative and play a key role. France was instrumental in pushing for an R2P resolution through the UN Security Council, and subsequently, in March 2011, it started the bombing before other powers. But although the Americans chose to stay out of the limelight on this occasion and push other actors to the front, they were still critical the allies’ ability to carry out the air-bombing operation, providing intelligence, reconnaissance and air-refueling – a capacity in which the European powers were seriously lacking.

Pushing the argument a little further, one could probe the idea that France is not only dependent on the US in the Middle East, but also – and increasingly – in the broader Sahel region, which used to be France’s ‘private hunting area’ (*chasse gardée*). The point is not that France is unable to act unilaterally in the Sahel: its 2013 intervention in Mali clearly showed that it is. But a new tendency appears to be emerging that France is increasingly willing to rely on – or at least to accept a certain dependence on – namely American intelligence and technology, even in North Africa and Sahel. Confronted with the threat of Islamic State and AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), the French military is overstretched. Although France is working closely with regional powers such as Algeria and Chad, today the US is the only reliable partner with intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capacity in the region, and which moreover has the willingness to deploy special forces, as, for instance, in Libya.

In the post-colonial period – roughly after 1960 – France got into the habit of intervening at its discretion in francophone West Africa. Between 1960 and 2010, France intervened thirty times on the continent, most often to ‘stabilize’ or create order, for instance when a friendly (autocratic) regime was threatened by rebellion.<sup>2</sup> With such a long tradition of unilateral intervention in Africa, it is, to say the least, surprising that, even in the broader Sahel region, the former colonial power is now intervening and exercising its military power in close concertation with the US.

The US was never a major player in the Sahel, however, and the question of its possible presence or withdrawal must therefore be asked in other terms than in the Middle East. Until the beginning of the 'global war on terror', the US presence in the Sahel was insignificant. It is therefore worthwhile considering the idea that, while the US is performing an apparent retreat from the Middle East, it is discreetly stepping up its presence in North Africa and the Sahel. Some authors have even suggested that the US is currently performing a 'pivot to Africa'.<sup>3</sup> But in contrast to the spectacular gung ho style of its intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, the growing military presence in North Africa and the Sahel is discrete and deliberately framed as a 'small' or 'light' footprint. To illustrate this point, it is repeated over and over again that AFRICOM – the US military command in Africa – only has one regular base in Africa (Djibouti). The question, however, is to what extent regular bases are relevant in gauging a state's military presence today, where mobile operating bases, special forces and drone stations, discreetly scattered all over the region, are becoming the norm.

Hence I suggest that in the Sahel region today France is neither filling a void, nor exercising traditional, unilateral power, but is working hand in glove with the American military, which itself is not scaling down, but on the contrary stepping up its efforts. As a relatively new player in the Sahel, however, the US needs France, which knows the region and is willing to put special forces on the ground to deal with an elusive terrorist threat; conversely, France, which is seeking burden-sharing, legitimacy, technology and intelligence capacity, is somehow in need of the US. As already mentioned, the point is not that France is unable to take unilateral action in the Sahel, but more precisely that, in the current situation, the Americans are present in the region to such an extent that France now has an interest in teaming up with them.

In January 2013, when France intervened in the north of Mali to fight a raft of terrorist groups, it became clear that, even in their own backyard, they were now somehow dependent on the US. Not only did the US provide air-carrier capacity and flew French troops and equipment into the region, but it soon turned out that France relied seriously on US surveillance technology. Within a month of the beginning of the French intervention, the US managed to put a 120-personnel drone-base into neighboring Niger very quickly, which among other things should provide intelligence for France's Operation Serval in Mali. In order to build up an independent French surveillance capacity in the vast Sahel region, France subsequently had to procure

three American Reaper drones, while another three are to be delivered in 2016. This is highly surprising: until now, a cornerstone of France's strategic mantra of 'independence' was precisely its independence of American military technology. During the Cold War, it was a top priority for France to develop not only independent nuclear capabilities, but also French combat planes, aircraft carriers etc. When France eventually realized that they had to buy foreign drones, they tried to steer clear of the American option by procuring Israeli ones. Against this backdrop, the recent embracing of American military technology is surprising and a sign of a new *modus vivendi*, even in the Sahel.

The seemingly flawless cooperation between France and the US in the Sahel has reached its pinnacle in Libya, where by 2016 Islamic State had established a territorial province around the coastal city of Sirte. A loose coalition of the US, UK, France and Italy is cooperating to manage the threat, but it appears that the cooperation between the US and France is particularly close. In 2016 the UN envoy to Libya, Martin Kobler, confirmed information revealed by the French paper *Le Monde* that the US and France have special forces on the ground in the country. When local government-backed militia in June 2016 attacked the IS stronghold in Sirte, it was French, American and British special forces that provided intelligence and target recognition.<sup>4</sup> The Americans have been explicit about their privileged relationship with France in Libya. At the beginning of 2016, when the Pentagon publicly stated that it was preparing for 'decisive military action' against Islamic State in Libya, it emphasized that such preparations were taking place in close collaboration with their 'French counterpart'. In Libya, however, this smooth cooperation appears to be unequal in the sense that the US would be able to act in Libya without France, whereas it is unlikely that France could act unilaterally in Libya without close collaboration with the Americans. Libya was never a French colony, and is not a part of the traditional French *chasse gardée*. The country is, however, a serious security concern for France due to the presence of Islamic State along the Mediterranean coastal strip, a footstep from Europe. Similarly, many of the Al Qaeda-related groups that were driven out of northern Mali in 2013 withdrew to southern Libya, from where they have launched several deadly attacks. But in Libya, France depends on the US to ensure its own security, whereas the US no doubt appreciates the French contribution, without, however, being dependent on it.

## FRENCH EMPOWERMENT THROUGH REGIONALIZATION

The exercise of French military power is not only becoming increasingly 'Americanized', but also to a still larger extent more regionalized. This tendency appears to be obvious in the North Africa-Sahel security complex today. In January 2013, when France started its intervention in Mali, it superficially resembled the good old days of the *Francafrrique*, when France could intervene in francophone Africa at its discretion. But although France initially acted alone in a sort of surprise attack, Operation Serval was carried out under a UN resolution and at the request of Mali's interim government. Moreover, just after the beginning of the intervention, France asked not only its Western allies, but in particular regional partners to join in the effort. In order to 'Africanize' the intervention, the African Union started deploying troops only a few days after the launch of the military operation, and Operation Serval, which was widely perceived as a French intervention, was formally a cooperative effort between France, Mali, Chad and Tuareg fighters from the rebel group the MNLA. When major cities in northern Mali were reconquered, Mali's army, which hardly played a role in the actual fighting, was pushed to the front, whereas French troops made themselves scarce. The large contribution of Chadian fighters, who are known for their capacity to fight in the desert, was highly appreciated by the French Chief of Staff, who did not miss any occasion to praise them to the skies.

In August 2014, Operation Serval morphed into Operation Barkhane, which is no longer limited to the geographical area of Mali, but is operating in a vast area of the Sahel region up to the Libyan borders. In line with the new norms of discretion and 'light footprints', this 3,500 ground troop presence consists of small mobile bases scattered all over the Sahel. But this French military presence is deliberately framed as a 'regional' endeavor, with 'partners' cooperating on an equal footing. According to the French Ministry of Defense, the aim of Barkhane is not to secure French interests, but to 'support partner countries in their military operations against terrorism'. Hence, France is not intervening unilaterally in the Sahel, but merely assuming the modest role of discretely supporting regional countries that have conveniently been assembled into a new security association, the G5-Sahel. Similarly, the G5-Sahel countries do not consider France to be a neo-colonial intruder, but as a 'strategic partner that has always supported the Sahel countries in their combat against terrorism'. But old habits die hard, and on at least one occasion the French habit of deploying forces at its discretion resurfaced. After a terrorist attack on a hotel in Côte d'Ivoire in the spring of 2016, the newly elected president

of Burkina Faso learned through the French media that France was now going to deploy a unit of the antiterrorist unit, the GIGN, to Burkina Faso. France soon made its excuses, and Burkina's president reverted to the vocabulary of 'normal procedures' and 'partnership' in relation to France.

This regionalization of French foreign policy is also being played out in relation to Libya, a country that is high on the agenda of French foreign policy. The unstable situation in Libya is not only a security concern for France and the US, but first and foremost for neighboring countries. Through partnerships with strong regional powers such as Algeria and Egypt, as well as Chad, France is acquiring regional leverage. Compared to the Middle East, where the US is pushing regional players to get involved in a constructive way, in the North Africa/Sahel security complex, Egypt, Algeria and Chad are strong regional powers that France has a clear interest in teaming up with.

The new conditions for the exercise of French power in North Africa-Sahel has therefore paved the way for new and sometimes surprising bedfellows. A case in point is Algeria. If one considers the strained historical relations between France and Algeria, going back to the Algerian War of Independence, their level of current cooperation appears, to say the least, surprising. But confronted with a common terrorist threat in Libya and the Sahel, France and Algeria have each accepted that they must move closer together. After the intervention in Mali in 2013, Algeria opened its airspace for French fighters for the first time since decolonization. And even more surprisingly, French special forces from Operation Barkhane are now apparently allowed to cross the Algerian border in order to pursue militants on the run. Just a few years back, it would have been hard to even imagine French soldiers on Algerian territory. Similarly, French–Egyptian relations today are excellent. Egypt has bought 24 French Rafale fighters, and there have been several head-of-state visits to France and Egypt respectively.

## **REARTICULATING FRENCH INTERVENTIONISM: CURRENT CONDITIONS FOR EXERCISING POWER IN THE MENAS**

Hence, France is hardly filling a void after the Americans: in the Middle East, France is not in a position to do so, and in North Africa and the Sahel there simply is no void to fill. North Africa and the Sahel have rather been the occasion for France to initiate surprisingly close cooperation with the US in an area that used to be the sphere of

influence of France alone. In the Middle East, the US is still present to such an extent that it somehow conditions French military action, while in North Africa/Sahel, the US has become a close partner. It was precisely in North Africa that the US launched the concept of 'leading from behind', which was perceived as a harbinger of the new American approach to the MENAS region. What is interesting about the concept of 'leading from behind', however, is not only that it is a symbol of American retreat, but more precisely that it nails down the current conditions for the exercise of power in the MENAS region more generally. What matters about this strategic concept is not only the word 'behind', but in particular the word 'leading': in other words, the US still has the intention to take lead, but intends to do so in more discrete ways by pushing other powers to the front. Hence, the concept of leading from behind is not only relevant as a metaphor for US disengagement, but more broadly for understanding the ways in which Western countries can exercise power in the Middle East and Africa today.

What I have suggested is that the current conditions for the exercise of power in these theatres indicate a 'regionalization' within French foreign policy. Today, the exercise of Western power in the Middle East and Africa is easily perceived as 'neo-colonial', which implies that the days of the 'Francafrrique', when France could intervene unilaterally at will in its former colonies and oversea departments, is over. Moreover, lessons learned from the recent interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan show that, when Western powers intervene in the Middle East, this easily feeds anti-Western sentiments. In a thoroughly mediatized world, Western penetration of non-Western regions must be bestowed with an air of legitimacy. This is not only a question of acting with respect to international law, but also of being perceived as legitimate by a global public. Hence, French interventionism abroad not only has to be discrete, it must also – in order to gain legitimacy – be cloaked in regional gowns. Today, it is a *sine qua non* for French military activism abroad that it must be performed with the agreement of and in close collaboration with regional partners.

As a middle power with a fragile economy, which nonetheless has the ambition of playing an active role in the MENAS region, France is not only seeking for legitimacy, but also burden-sharing. Consequently, France is increasingly on the lookout for regional powers with military capacities. The French struggle to be a power that still matters is inducing France to demand strong regional powers to participate in and take their share of military operations. Hence, French interventionism goes hand in hand with increased regionalization in the precise sense that regional powers are asked to ramp up and contribute the military capabilities to deal with regional

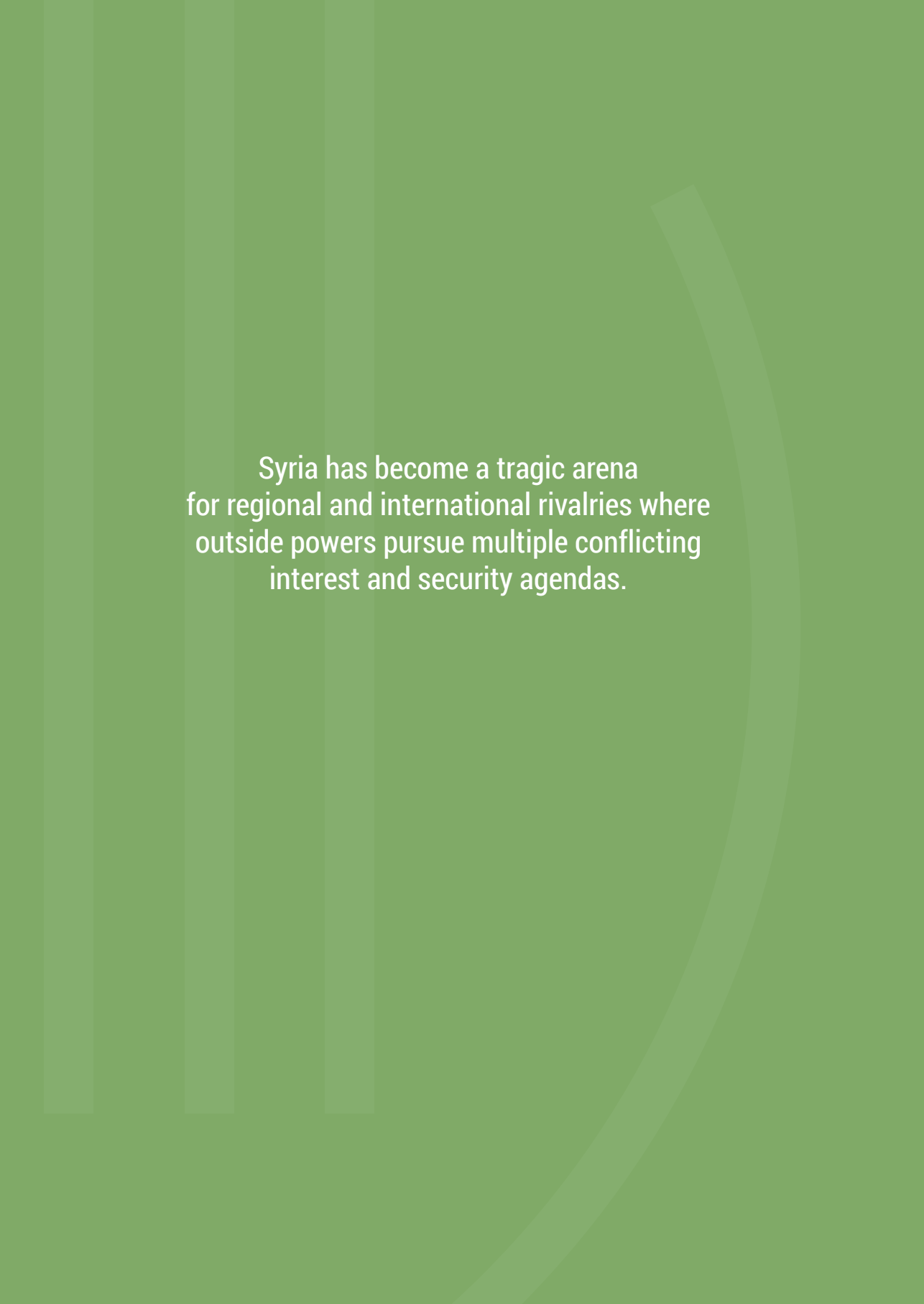
threats and conflicts. The current conditions for France's exercise of military power are then at least twofold. On the one hand, French military operations must be perceived to be legitimate by a regional, if not global public. On the other hand, regional players must cooperate on security matters and take part in military operations. The main reason for intervening abroad is no longer 'stabilization' or humanitarian intervention, but first and foremost 'terrorism' – a manifold and elusive threat that paves the way for engaging with new partners and building new alliances. Today both Islamic State and Al Qaeda are present all over the MENAS region, where they also constitute a threat to regional powers.

But increased regionalization is not synonymous with increased regional autonomy. Rather, French penetration in the MENAS region is being rearticulated in such a way that it is increasingly bound up with regional partners and alliances. In other words, the French military presence is made possible by the appearance of it being regionalized, and the increased regional involvement of regional powers is being conducted in tandem with foreign powers such as the US. When regional powers like Turkey or certain Gulf countries, for instance, play a greater role in the Syrian conflict, this is not necessarily regional autonomy. The regional powers are not replacing the foreign powers that have penetrated the region; they are entering into a complex security situation, where external players such as the US, Russia, France and others are present in various ways.

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The background is a solid green color. It features several vertical stripes of varying shades of green, creating a textured effect. A large, thin, curved line, also in a shade of green, sweeps across the right side of the image, starting from the top and curving downwards.

Syria has become a tragic arena  
for regional and international rivalries where  
outside powers pursue multiple conflicting  
interest and security agendas.

**Wars within Wars**

# **REGIONAL ACTORS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE BATTLE FOR SYRIA**

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**By Helle Malmvig**

The Syrian uprising has evolved into a complex proxy war between global, regional and non-state actors. These actors finance and direct the war, and it is primarily their competition for power and influence in the Middle East that keeps the war going into its sixth year. The proxy nature of the Syrian conflict effectively means that neither the Assad regime nor the many different rebel groups would be able to carry on fighting without massive transfers of military, political and economic means. The Syrian regime depends heavily on soldiers from Hezbollah and Iranian-recruited Shia-militias, on billion-dollar loans and military hardware, and since 2015 on Russian airpower and political clout. Similarly the many rebel groups rely on weapons, money and training they receive in particular from the Gulf countries and Turkey, but also from Western powers. The recent Russian intervention and the US-led fight against Islamic State (IS) have only added another complicated layer to Syria's multiple lines of conflict.

This chapter focuses on regional dynamics by examining the policies and interests that are driving the involvement of key regional actors – Iran, Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel – in Syria. It argues that these main players are driven by conflicting interests and engaged in multiple cross-cutting allegiances, which have fueled the war and created a Pandora's box of wars within wars. Thus at the international level, a proxy war is going on between the West and Russia, and another between IS and the US-led international coalition. At the regional level, there is a proxy war between an Iranian-led and a Saudi-led alliance, another between

Turkey and Kurdish forces, and yet another involving Israel against Hezbollah and Iran. At the local level, there are several lines conflict: between various rebel factions, who at times are cooperating and at other times fighting against each other, namely the Free Syrian Army versus Fatah As Sham, the FSA versus the YPG, and all groups versus IS, as well as involving regime forces and their allied foreign militias against the rebel factions. In short the Syrian war cannot be analyzed as one war, but must be seen as multiple overlapping wars. The implications of this are profound. As this chapter will conclude, the multiplicity of external actors and agendas is dragging out the war(s), making it much more difficult to engage in compromise and grand bargain-sharing. Sadly, Syria is therefore unlikely to see an end to violence anytime soon.

## **FROM UPRISING TO WAR**

In early 2011, thousands of demonstrators went onto the streets demanding freedom, dignity and social justice. Syrian protesters broke the wall of fear that had helped the Assad family rule over Syria for over four decades, and they did so across a broad spectrum of class and sectarian affinities. The uprising was, of course, inspired by the events in Tunisia and Egypt: the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak spurred a growing belief across the region that the dictatorial Arab regimes were not invincible and indeed could be overthrown. In their place, it was hoped new representative and legitimate governance structures would be developed. However, from very early on the Syrian regime engaged in an effective campaign to counter the claims made by the protesters, for instance, about the peaceful nature of the uprising, its non-sectarian basis and its genuine Syrian character. On Syrian state television, the uprising was repeatedly portrayed as being orchestrated and infiltrated by spies and foreign agents – i.e. the Western powers, Israel, Saudi Arabia. It was claimed that the protesters were being led by terrorists and that their main goal was to install an Islamist government led by a Sunni majority, who would exclude Syria's many sectarian minorities, or even take revenge and engage in 'sectarian cleansing'. Tragically, as the Syrian uprising evolved into a war, many of these claims have turned into self-fulfilling prophecies.

Although foreign powers were not involved in the early phases of the Syrian protest, this started to change as the uprising gradually turned into an armed rebellion. With the regime's crack-down on protesters and whole cities being besieged, soldiers began to defect from the Syrian Army, and some took up arms to protect civilians.

This paved the way for the formation of the FSA and a new demand for weapons and finance. The Gulf countries and Turkey were eager to assist, since these would also be the main geopolitical beneficiaries of a regime change in Syria.

## **INTERVENTIONS OF FOREIGN POWERS**

### **Saudi-Arabia: Rival Regional Powers in Syria**

Saudi Arabia, together with Turkey, became one of the main supporters of the Syrian opposition and rebel forces. Saudi Arabia has financed various Syrian rebel groups, from the FSA to the Islamic Front, providing them with arms and training, and at various times seeking to build strong new political institutions, military command structures and larger coalitions of rebel forces, such as the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), the Islamic Front or more recently the High Negotiation Committee HNC. Several times the Kingdom has also threatened to intervene militarily on side of the rebels or to step up its deliveries of military hardware. Yet in the absence of support from the US, and with the Russian intervention in 2015, these threats have largely ceased to be credible.

Nonetheless Saudi fighter jets have flown over the skies of Syria, though as part of the US-led coalition against IS, rather than in support of other rebel forces. The Saudi Kingdom has in fact repeatedly been accused of financing IS and some of the more radical groups in Syria such as Jabhat al Nusra. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the Saudi government itself has financed these groups, although private Saudi businessmen and charities may very well have done so.<sup>1</sup> As Abboud has recently argued, Saudi Arabia's financing of rebel groups has been less concerned with ideological affinities and more with its initial competition for influence over the rebel forces with Qatar and Turkey. Saudi Arabia eschewed supporting many Salafist brigades and threw most of its effort behind FSA-affiliated groups, in contrast to Qatar and Turkey, which have both allegedly funded the Nusra Front. Although there are ideational similarities between the Wahabist branch of Islam promulgated by Saudi Arabia and the radical form of Salafism preached by IS, the two are obviously not allies, nor do they share any overarching interest in Syria. IS, for instance, has officially declared the Saudi Kingdom to be one of its main enemies and has carried out several terror attacks within the kingdom.

So why did Saudi Arabia become so deeply aligned with the Syrian opposition? On the whole Saudi Arabia was skeptical about the popular uprisings that swept the Arab world in 2011. It feared for its own regime's security and for the fate of its staunchest regime allies in the region, Mubarak's Egypt and Jordan's King Abdullah in particular. Thus in the first months of the uprising, Saudi Arabia, together with Turkey, tried to broker a deal with Assad that would lead to real reforms and transition without Assad himself stepping down. However, as the promised reforms did not materialize, the two states, increasingly antagonistic towards the Assad regime, began supporting the opposition and the FSA wholeheartedly, now calling for Assad's overthrow. Saudi Arabia also came to view a potential regime change in Syria as extremely beneficial to its own regional agenda and its rivalry as a regional power with Iran. With Assad gone, Tehran was likely to lose its influence in Syria, while Saudi Arabia would gain because the balance in the region would tilt in its favor.

However, in the first years of the armed rebellion, Saudi Arabia seemed to be competing just as ferociously with Turkey and Qatar over the financing of rebel forces and appointments to leading politico-military positions within the Syrian opposition. The three states evidently shared an interest in strengthening the rebel forces, but they nevertheless set up parallel patron-client structures within the FSA and its ever-emerging splinter groups, causing further fragmentation among these groups and the political opposition. The tripartite rivalry was in part a result of a regional power struggle, but it also concerned Saudi Arabia's own domestic security. Saudi Arabia in particular feared the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Qatar and Turkey's open support of the Brotherhood in Syria and elsewhere in the region was a source of constant tension between the three states. At the time, for instance, a Saudi diplomat claimed to me that the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood posed a greater challenge to the Saudi regime than the liberal-secular ideology that had initially informed the Arab Uprisings.

By late 2013, however, the competition for influence over the various rebel groups and the opposition had somewhat softened. Morsi had been ousted in Egypt, there had been a change of leadership in Qatar, and Iran and Hezbollah had stepped up their military involvement in Syria. Saudi Arabia increasingly came to view Iran as the main enemy and as a rising regional hegemon which it could not balance alone. The nuclear agreement and the Obama administration's continued reluctance to become entangled in the Syrian battlefield made Saudi Arabia all the more wary of Iran. In response Riyadh managed to rally most Arab states, including Turkey and

Qatar, behind its Syrian policy. Even Israel and Saudi Arabia moved closer to one another as a result of their shared fear of Iranian ambitions. Iran and Saudi Arabia have, of course, long been spearheading what is often described as a Middle East Cold War, but this rivalry now escalated into outright proxy warfare in Syria. In short, Syria emerged as the main battleground for Saudi-Iranian zero sum competition.

### **Iran and Hezbollah: Fighting to Maintain Access and Influence in Syria**

Iran and Hezbollah became involved in the battle for Syria on the opposing side as early as 2011. However, the interventions of these two actors quickly became much deeper and larger than those of Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Iran and Hezbollah are thus heavily present on the ground militarily themselves, not merely through proxies, and both are contributing with advisors, special troops and soldiers. Hezbollah is playing a direct combat role operating alongside, and sometimes in command of, Syrian Army forces and paramilitary groups. Besides supporting the Assad regime politically and financially, Iran is also playing a major strategic and advisory role, which enables it to make tactical and strategic decisions independently of the regime.<sup>2</sup> On the ground Iran has its own special forces (the Quod forces), but it is primarily relying on Shia-recruited fighters from Iraq and as far afield as Afghanistan and Pakistan to do the fighting on the battlefield.

Today Iran and Hezbollah have thus locked their security interests in Syria to the preservation of the Assad regime. But this was not entirely a given from the outset. Iran, Hezbollah and the Assad regime have, of course, been strongly allied since the early 1990s, but in the early days of the uprising Syria's two staunch allies seemed to be struggling to find an appropriate response to the Syrian crisis. On one hand, Iran and Hezbollah were interested in safeguarding their popularity in the Arab World, a popularity that was partly based on their revolutionary narrative, resistance to Israel and non-sectarian outlook. Yet this regional legitimacy was arguably challenged by their support for a dictatorship that was clamping down hard on its own people, including the Palestinians. On the other hand, Iran and Hezbollah were greatly dependent on maintaining their influence in Syria, which they risked losing should the Assad regime fall. Balancing these two considerations initially meant that Iran and Hezbollah were generally supportive of the Arab uprisings in official speeches and discourses, in which they sought to argue that the protests around the region echoed the Resistance Front's own revolutionary values. With respect to the Assad regime, Iran and Hezbollah urged it to undertake the necessary reforms and stressed the importance of listening to the voice of the people, yet without directly calling for Assad to step down.

Incrementally, however, Iran and Hezbollah stepped up their support for the Assad regime. At first this was a matter of sending military advisors, but by 2012 Hezbollah were fighting the FSA in Syria's border region with Lebanon, although adamantly denying this in public. In the summer of 2013 Hezbollah successfully retook the town of al-Qasayr from the rebels. The battle for al-Qasayr was a turning point, which led to further Hezbollah involvement in battlefronts all over Syria and decisively helped the Assad regime to regain territory and remain in power. The regime's dependence on Hezbollah and Iran has only increased since 2013, most analysts agreeing that, without it, it would have collapsed, and some even arguing that it is Iran and Hezbollah that are effectively making and shaping the regime's political and military strategy.

To explain why Iran and Hezbollah were willing to risk upsetting the sectarian balance in Lebanon, thus risking eroding their regional legitimacy and tarnishing their reputation as non-sectarian, one has to look at three factors:

- The importance of Syria as a transit route for Iran and Hezbollah
- Syria's importance vis-à-vis Israel
- The regional power balance and the rivalry with Saudi Arabia

For Hezbollah, keeping the route open to Syria is very closely tied to its own strength and unique position within Lebanon's confessional political system. Hezbollah is dependent on weapons transfers and logistical assistance from Iran via Syrian territory order to maintain its power base inside Lebanon and keeping the confessional status quo intact. Hezbollah is the only remaining party in Lebanon that has not been disarmed since the Lebanese civil war, officially so Hezbollah can defend Lebanon in any future wars with Israel. And indeed, should the flows of weapons from Iran be disrupted, that would have serious implications for Hezbollah's capacity to initiate against Israel or retaliate against Israeli attacks, just as it would have implications for the balance of power inside Lebanon. For Iran, strategic considerations are also paramount and closely tied to those of Hezbollah. Syria and Hezbollah serve as a strategic deterrence against Israel: for instance, should Israel seek to strike at Iran's nuclear facilities, Tehran would be able to retaliate through Hezbollah or from Syrian soil. Moreover, Syria is – together with Iraq – the only Arab country allied with Iran and is key for Iran in its regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia. Should the Assad regime fall, Tehran fears that it would be replaced by a government



more sympathetic to Saudi Arabia than to Iran. In sum, as Saade similarly argues in this volume, Iran and Hezbollah's overriding objectives has thus been to protect the Resistance Axis and Hezbollah's power position in Lebanon. To this end, both actors found it opportune to fight this battle on Syrian soil, rather than in Lebanon itself.

While Iran and Hezbollah's strong support to the Assad regime is mainly tied to their strategic interest in maintaining their influence and access to Syria, they do, however, also view the rise of Sunni extremist groups within Syria (as, for instance, Jabhat al Nusra, Ahrar al Sham and Islamic State) as genuine security threats, in part because of the fierce anti-Shia rhetoric of these groups, and they fear potential terror attacks from radical Sunni groups on their own soil, as Sadaa also explains in this volume. Iran itself has not experienced any attacks from, for instance, IS or Jabhat al Nusra, but Lebanon has witnessed several attacks directed at Hezbollah and Shia-dominated parts of Lebanon, as well as intense fighting between Hezbollah and radical Sunni groups in the northeast border area around Aarsal. In official discourse, Iran and Hezbollah also tend to portray all Syrian rebel groups as terrorists and/or Wahabi-inspired extremists, making few if any distinctions between the various groups. When this author, in an interview with a high-ranking Hezbollah official in 2015, asked whether there were any armed opposition groups in Syria that he would consider not to be terrorists, the answer was negative. Similarly the Hezbollah official repeatedly emphasized how these groups were funded and inspired by Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia's Wahabism.

Thus, although one should be careful not to overstate the importance of sectarianism when explaining Iran and Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war, sectarian identity politics is playing an increasing role as a form of (de-) legitimation and fear-mongering on the part of the main actors involved on the Syrian battlefield. Arguably Hezbollah and Iran claim that they are not engaged in sectarianism – it is rather Saudi Arabia, the US, Israel and radical Sunni groups that are causing fitna – but their subtle use of terms such as Wahabis, 'takfiris' and 'terrorists' effectively serves as a rallying cry for war and to delegitimize the opposition in Syria. Moreover, Iran's exclusive recruitment of Shia fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, and their references to the need to protect Shia holy shrines in Syria, have contributed to the notion in the wider region that there is at least a hint of sectarian motivation behind Iran and Hezbollah's close alliance with the Assad regime.<sup>3</sup>

### **Turkey: Fighting a Three-Front War**

Prior to the revolts of 2011, Turkey had relatively good relations with Syria and Iran in line with its zero-problems-with-neighbours policy. However, as the Assad regime cracked down hard on the Syrian opposition, Ankara cut its ties with it and ended up being one of the strongest supporters of the Syrian opposition and the most vigorous advocate of the overthrow of the regime. Turkey has thus housed the opposition and the FSA, facilitated the transfer of weapons and fighters to the armed rebellion and served as a main humanitarian corridor. In contrast to the case of Saudi Arabia, this policy was not initially grounded in rivalry with Iran, as Turkey also had good ties with Tehran, but was rather a result of the Erdogan government's own regional ambitions and its wish to support the Arab uprisings, and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. The Turkish government believed it had a special role to play as a form of democratic-Islamic role model, which could serve as an inspiration for other Muslim states. Yet Turkey's overt regional ambitions often caused resentment and revived accusations of neo-Ottomanism in many Arab states. The Erdogan government's increasing repressive policies at home and its assertive policy in Syria similarly divided Turkey's own domestic society.

Turkey's quest for military intervention in support of the rebel forces also meant it grew increasingly at odds with the US and Western powers. Turkey was dissatisfied with what it perceived to be a too complacent Western policy and, together with Saudi Arabia, it repeatedly sought to rally support for a no-fly zone in Syria. Turkey felt that a no-fly zone would put more pressure on the Assad regime to enter political negotiations and eventually step down, and it would also create a safe haven for Syrian refugees and the exiled opposition where the latter could slowly build up an effective government.

Disagreements over policies and priorities in Syria became even more pronounced, however, as IS gained traction in Syria over the course of 2013-2014. From early on in the conflict, Turkey had allowed Syrian refugees, fighters and trade to flow relatively freely across the border, and it thus received the largest number of Syrian refugees of all countries in the region, amounting to up to three million. Yet the open border also led to an influx of foreign jihadists. Many governments accused the Erdogan government of turning a blind eye to fighters from IS using Turkey as a transit hub to smuggle oil, antiquities and foreign fighters, and Turkey was repeatedly rebuked for being lukewarm in its support of the international coalition's efforts to fight IS. Some analysts even suggested that Turkey was supporting IS or being tactically allied with it. Undoubtedly, the Erdogan government has been less interested in combatting IS, given the fact that the latter also is fighting the Kurdish

YPG forces and the Assad regime. Turkey's cautious policy on IS can in this sense be seen as a classic case of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. However, the Erdogan government has also repeatedly argued that it wanted to deal with the Assad regime first, and only thereafter with IS, in so far as Turkey perceives the latter to be a symptom of Syria's predicament rather than its cause.

First and foremost, however, the Erdogan government's main concern in Syria is the Kurdish issue. The Syrian Kurds, spearheaded by the YPG, have gained ever more territory from IS along the Turkish border, and the Pershmerga forces are widely perceived in the West as the strongest and most – if not only – reliable local force on the ground. The YPG is thus supported by airpower and weapons transfers from the US. Yet to Turkey there is no fine distinction between the PKK and the YPG; both are considered to be terrorist organizations. Turkey fears that a Kurdish statelet is being created under the tutelage of the US and that an autonomous Kurdish area could be used as safe haven for the Turkish PKK or renew the Turkish Kurds' own wish for autonomy. This also partly explains why the Turkish government has been so adamant in its wish to set up a no-fly zone in northern Syria, as this would prevent the Kurds from gaining a contiguous stretch territory along the border.

Whereas Turkey is unlikely to retreat on the Kurdish issue, its regional policy, including its position on IS, appears to be changing. The new Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, has announced that 'We will increase the number of our friends and reduce the number of our enemies'.<sup>4</sup> In the summer of 2016 Turkey began to restore relations with Israel as well as with Russia, just as in 2015 the government gave the US-led coalition permission to use the Incirlik air base for raids against IS inside Syria. At the time, this move was probably part of an implicit deal with the US, whereby the latter agreed to turn a blind eye to Turkey's aerial strikes at PKK positions in northern Iraq in the wake of the PKK's attacks in eastern Turkey. Yet Turkey has now experienced fifteen bomb attacks carried out by IS, and at times by Kurdish militant groups, giving it further incentives to take part more wholeheartedly in the military operations against the former.

In sum, Turkey's assertive policy in Syria and its complex and changing play of alliances have caused a direct spill-over of the Syrian war into Turkey and have affected the country much more acutely than is the case for, e.g., Saudi Arabia or Iran. Turkey can now be said to be fighting a three-front war against IS, the Assad regime and the Kurds. This has clearly left Turkey more vulnerable and open to compromise, as its latest rapprochements with Russia and Israel may indicate.

### **Israel: In Pursuit of Conflicting Interests**

From the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Israel has sought to contain the country from the conflict on its border, avoiding being drawn into the war or allying itself too closely with any one of the warring parties. Officially Israel has maintained a position of neutrality by not making any public statements either calling for Assad to step down or supporting the opposition. This has led some observers to argue that, in spite of the Assad regime's close alliance with Iran and its official policy of resistance, Israel actually has a keen interest in keeping the Assad regime in place. The Assad family is the devil Israel knows, which in effect has kept the border in the Golan Heights quiet for over forty years. Conversely, other analysts argue that Israel has an obvious interest in the fall of the regime in so far as this would constitute a major strategic blow to Iran and Hezbollah by removing the route for the flows of weapons to the Lebanese movement. Meanwhile the more hawkish element argues that Israel's interests are best served by letting all parties continue fighting, thereby weakening all of Israel's enemies.

All of these perspectives have some merits. Israeli policy-makers are clearly divided internally over how to approach the conflict in Syria and have in many ways struggled to find a consistent policy response to balance its conflicting interests there. As the rebel groups have become more radicalized, with groups such as Jabhat Fateh al Sham (former Jabhat al-Nusra) and IS gaining prominence, Israel fears the chaos and threats to it from these radical groups should the Assad regime fall and Syria drift into further state collapse and disorder. Israel is anxious about the possibility of Syria's weapons arsenal, including its chemical weapons, falling into the hands of these militant groups, who might turn the weapons against Israel. At the same time, however, Iran and Hezbollah's activities and strong military presence in Syria is clearly seen as a longer term threat to Israel than IS or Jabhat Fetah al Sham, and Israel would undoubtedly prefer Iran and Hezbollah to be weakened both in Syria and regionally.

In the last couple of years, these conflicting agendas have become even more difficult to reconcile, as Israel has intensified its engagement on the Syrian battlefield. In 2013 Israel carried out its first air strike on a Hezbollah convoy allegedly heading for Lebanon with arms, and since then there have been several Israeli air attacks, targeted killings and Hezbollah-Israeli skirmishes in the Golan area. There are also reports that Israel may be aiding to some degree the training of rebel forces inside Jordan<sup>5</sup>, as well as providing and sharing intelligence on Syria's battlefield with several Arab

states. Israel also continues to provide some humanitarian aid and medical treatment to fighters and some civilians from Syria, who are let into Israel for treatment and then send back into Syria. Some Syrian opposition figures and pundits in Washington have also floated the idea that Israel could be useful in setting up a potential safe zone in the south of Syria. Yet at the same time, Israel continues to have good relations with Russia, and in the wake of Putin's military intervention, Israel and Russia agreed to a number of mechanisms to reduce conflict over the skies of Syria. This agreement is vital for Israel, since it implicitly entails a Russian acceptance of Israeli strikes against Hezbollah assets inside Syria.

Thus, while the official policy is one of 'taking no sides', the actual policy should perhaps rather be seen as a case of 'betting on all sides'. Israel has become more deeply involved in Syria over the course of the war, but in comparison with the other major regional powers – Iran, Turkey, Saudi-Arabia – Israel has been less affected by the war, and its involvement is on a different scale. The country's difficult relations or outright enmity with regional states, and especially their domestic societies, makes Israel a difficult 'alliance partner' in Syria and in the region as a whole. For good reasons, Israel is not part of the diplomatic process, whether that means the Friends of Syria Grouping or the UN Geneva negotiations, nor does Israel take part directly in the military operations against IS being led by the US.

## **CONCLUSION**

The involvement and direct intervention of regional actors in the Syrian uprising have escalated, complicated and diverted the Syrian conflict. Syria has become a tragic arena for regional and international rivalries, where outside actors pursue multiple conflicting interests and security agendas. This does not imply that the original conflict against the regime has disappeared, but rather that it has become subordinated to the wider regional and international power play, with devastating consequences for the Syrians themselves. This makes a political solution or grand regional bargain all the more difficult to achieve. This is partly due to the fact that de-escalation, compromise and conflict-resolution are all the more difficult to achieve, given the many conflicting agendas, actors and cross-cutting patron-client relationships. But it also partly stems from the fact that the main regional sponsors still seem to believe they can gain more from continuing the war rather than ending it. To put it bluntly, their interest is not in resolving the Syrian conflict(s), but in

ensuring that their interests and influence continue to be well represented on the ground. As this chapter has shown, the fact that Iran and Saudi Arabia, for instance, are not themselves very much directly affected by the continuation of the war in the form of spill-over effects or casualties on the battlefield gives them fewer incentives to engage in compromise and power-sharing: the cost of the war is simply not sufficiently high. Thus, while many Syrians are war-weary and long for basic security, food and shelter, this may not be true for many of the external sponsors of the war.

1 Samer Nassif Abboud, *Syria*, Cambridge MA: Polity Press, 2016, 142).

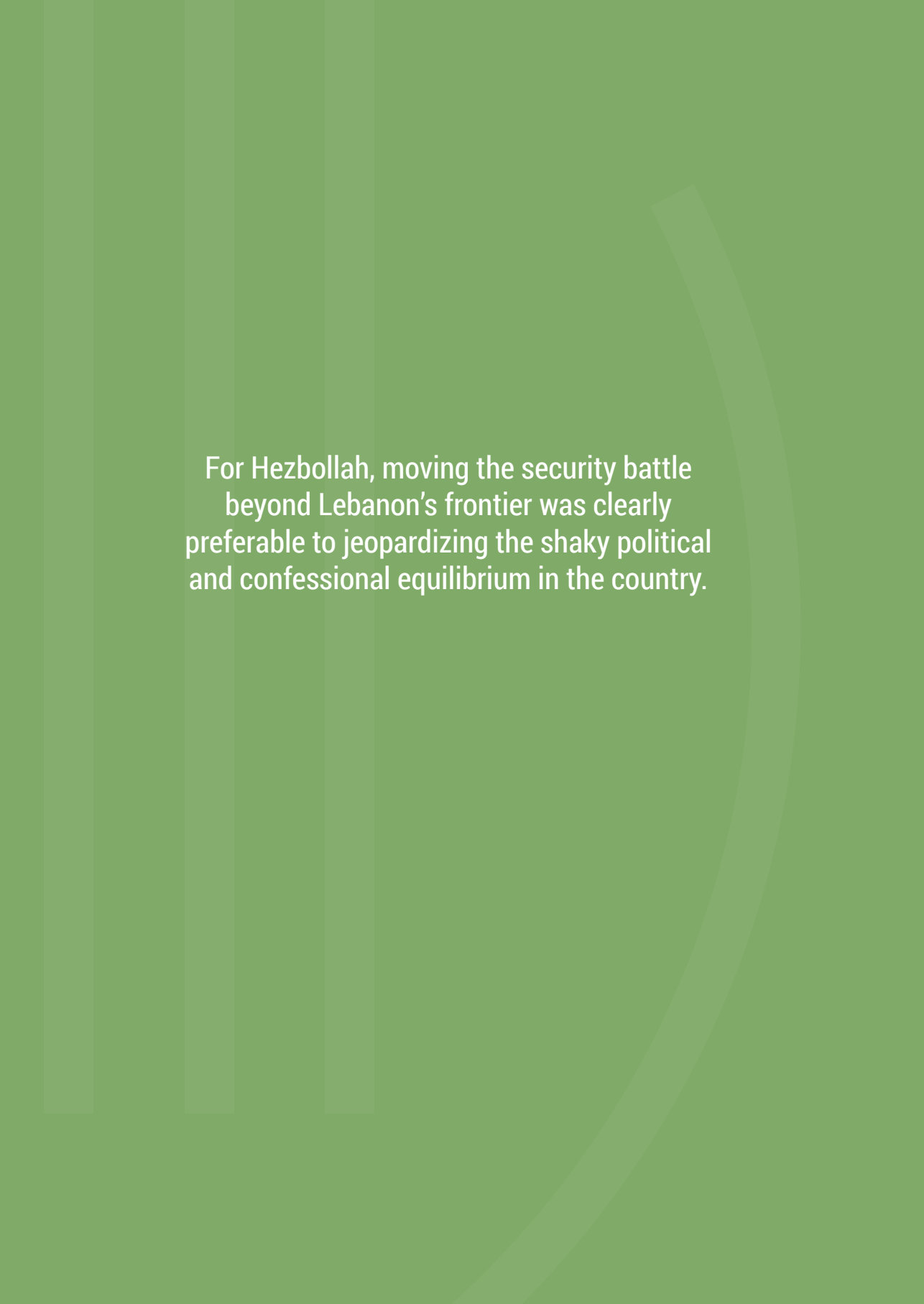
2 Abboud 2016: 115.

3 Similarly, Saudi Arabia and many of the Gulf states – especially state-sanctioned clerics – have for long used derogatory and sectarian terms such as rafidha, Safawi, and lately hizb al- Shaytan/Hizb al-Lat to describe Hizbullah and discredit the opposition at home, as well as regionally, to galvanize the opposition to Iran and mobilize popular support for Saudi Arabia's intervention and wars in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain.

4 Behlül Özka, 2016 (Behlül Özkan, "Is Erdoğan Holding Europe Hostage?", Center for American Progress May 24, 2016?).

5 Le Figaro, 17.8.2013; Jerusalem Post, 23.8.2013.



The background is a solid green color. It features several vertical stripes of varying shades of green, creating a textured effect. A large, thin, curved line, also in a shade of green, sweeps across the right side of the image, starting from the top and curving downwards.

For Hezbollah, moving the security battle  
beyond Lebanon's frontier was clearly  
preferable to jeopardizing the shaky political  
and confessional equilibrium in the country.



**Hezbollah and its 'Takfiri' Enemy in Syria**

# **RETHINKING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STATES AND NON-STATE ACTORS**

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**By Bashir Saade**

Within one year, popular protests in Syria were transformed into an all-out militarized confrontation involving the entire Middle East region. In March 2011, the first protests in Daraa and Damascus were violently suppressed first by the Syrian security forces, and then by the army that saw some of its members defect and join a slowly forming and loosely organized Free Syrian Army (FSA). As defections increased, regional actors such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia started channelling funds to the FSA, joined by the CIA, who funnelled more sophisticated military equipment through the Turkish southern frontier. As the Syrian regime gradually relinquished control over major towns and cities where defection rates were high, Syria was soon transformed into pockets of territory controlled by competing militias. This was exacerbated by the 2014 entry on to the scene of Islamic State (IS) that captured vast chunks of its north-eastern desert territory.

The decision of Hezbollah, the Lebanese armed political party, to enter Syria through the eastern Lebanese frontier in order to help the embattled Syrian army, along with other allies such as Iran and Iraqi militias, was key to the success of the Syrian regime in regaining and holding on to significant amounts of territory. This chapter aims to explain the logic of Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, and in so doing, to shed light on the dynamics governing the interaction between different state and non-state actors in the region in this time of conflict. It suggests that Lebanese security concerns are central to understanding Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria. Moreover, it is important to conceptualize Lebanon and Syria as interconnected security fields with an impact on the foreign policies of state and non-state actors in the region.

More generally, understanding events in Syria, especially the calculations and actions of the Syrian regime and its ally Hezbollah, requires a historical step back. Syria as a political and social field, like any other 'local' field in the Middle East, is embedded in regional considerations. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a key event that transformed the politics of the region, and Hezbollah was already present in its immediate aftermath. In the heydays of US triumphalism after the seizure of Baghdad, talk of marching on Damascus was common. In effect, in order to understand the politics of Middle East state and non-state actors, especially in the contested region of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, it is important to reflect on the intricate ways in which regional and local dynamics interact.

The findings proposed in this chapter can be situated, in the present volume, between Boserup's emphasis on domestic factors in the dynamics of Arab politics, especially here the case of Lebanon and Syria, and recognizing the importance of the regional environment, so well set out by Malmvig, that shapes state and non-state actors' relationships, interests and alignments. Use of the term 'domestic' here, signals the fact that the chapter is more interested in looking at how organized and armed groups have defended local interests by navigating within the regional level, and the extent to which regional alignments and relationships were a product of weak sovereignties and involved different rationales for armed action. While Hezbollah is the main case in point here, the paper will also draw conclusions from other actors such as radical Sunni militant organizations.

A tight security belt ties Syria to Lebanon. The assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in early 2005, which also triggered the clumsy military withdrawal of the Syrian regime from Lebanon, is inscribed in a series of political changes set off by the US invasion of Iraq as Syria struggled to tackle new threats and opportunities. The various Islamist armed organizations that surfaced at different points in time in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq are all tied together in different ways, especially in how they have dealt with the security structures in the region. Lebanon, Iraq and now Syria have witnessed intermittent breakdowns of the state and the consolidation of militia politics. In a situation where weak sovereignties prevail, states and certain non-state actors try to move the security battle to where the field is the most fragile. Ultimately, authoritarianism should be thought of as a political regime that is a product of a weakened security field.

Until 2011, the main arena in which security questions were asked was Lebanon, although it did involve the transfer of political actors, militants and ideologues from Iraq or Syria into Lebanon and vice versa. After Hariri's assassination, various

security incidents marked an incredibly unstable political environment in Lebanon, from assassinations of political figures to all-out street wars, culminating in Israel's predominantly aerial military attack against Lebanon in July 2006. Apart from the multitudes of political assassinations and terrorist attacks in busy civilian areas, other important episodes include the Lebanese army's assault on the Palestinian camp of Nahr el Bared in May 2007 against Fath al Islam, an obscure radical Sunni Islamic group that has a strong contingency of foreign fighters; and Hezbollah's attack on Mustaqbal's newly forming militia one year later, after the majority ruling government, led by Mustaqbal, threatened to shut down its telecommunication channels.

Events unfolding in Syria are a direct continuation of the unfolding war in Iraq and the various security skirmishes in Lebanon. On 25 May 2013, during the commemoration of 'Liberation Day' which annually remembers the withdrawal of the Israeli army from the south of Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah appeared from a television screen to make the case for Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria. A little more than a month before, the Syrian army had launched an assault on Qusayr and its nearby hilltops that oversees most of the border villages between Lebanon and Syria, with the help of Hezbollah's military. Nasrallah opened his speech with special greetings to 'the people of the West Bekaa', remembering the centrality of the region for the Resistance project from its formative years in the 1980s. But there was another reason why Nasrallah greeted West Bekaa towns and villages. As a result of heavy fighting between the Syrian army and Hezbollah on one side and the different opposition militias prevalent in the region on the other, Syrian rebel groups were also shelling border villages across the Lebanese frontier.<sup>1</sup>

There is little proof that Hezbollah had intervened significantly in the Syrian conflict earlier than this battle, except maybe in terms of intelligence work. Nasrallah often states that Hezbollah intervened 'too late'. During this period of military incursions, Hezbollah helped the Syrian army to recapture Qusayr, where it predominantly fought the Farouq Battalions, a heteroclite group of 'Islamist' fighters with complex ideological backgrounds and shifting allegiances mostly originating from the wider Homs area. There were reports that Jubhat al Nusra was present in these locations, yet allegiance to any specific organization was still elusive at this stage. Most rebel fighters who escaped these initial battles made their way to the north-east Lebanese town of Aarsal. Two years later, Hezbollah and the Syrian Army continued moving forward as they launched an assault on the Qalamoun region, culminating in the widely publicized siege of Zabadani from July to September 2015. One immediate

consequence of this military intervention was to drive out these groups from the eastern border region, which Hezbollah succeeded in doing, although with the side-effect that some of the remaining fighters who were fleeing this region ended up seeking refuge in the border town of Aarsal, where a protracted conflict started with the Lebanese Army as soon as the Qalamoun assault had stopped.

The overriding objective for Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has been to protect the Resistance Axis, an alignment of state and non-state actors that aims both to act as a military deterrent to Israel and to strengthen Palestinian militant groups in the Occupied Palestinian territories. In the speech mentioned above, Nasrallah threatened those who would try to break Syria, 'the back of the Resistance', and responded to attacks on the rationale for an armed organization, as Hezbollah thought that a regime change in Damascus would bring to power a political class antagonistic to the Resistance Project. However, owing to the highly controversial nature of this intervention, Hezbollah's leaders have also insisted that Hezbollah and the Syrian regime have not always been on good terms (such as in the early 1990s, when they clashed over security questions in the southern suburbs of Beirut), and that the defence of the regime only constitutes a strategic advantage to the organization.

On the ground, Hezbollah's most obvious military strategies and subsequent achievements have been to maintain the territorial integrity of the Syrian state, to secure the Lebanese frontier and to protect Shi'i villages in Syria. It provides logistical help to the various local pro-government militias that work alongside the Syrian army, the National Defence Force (NDF), by providing strategic know-how in irregular guerrilla warfare. These skills are specific to Hezbollah and have been highly instrumental in giving the regime the strategic edge to recapture certain areas. At times, Hezbollah also took command of Syrian military units while coordinating with the Quds Force (Iran's Revolutionary Guards' special forces) and Syrian military commanders, especially in irregular urban warfare, alongside the deployment of Iraqi militias.

## **UNDERSTANDING HEZBOLLAH'S INTERVENTION IN SYRIA**

Hezbollah is often called an Iranian proxy in the Levant, a mere executioner of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. Others argue that Hezbollah is acting out of 'national' interests, but it is not clear how 'nationalist' objectives translate into

regional politics and are constantly transformed as a result. The relationship between the local and the regional is embedded in a security field that transcends state territorial boundaries. In a region where state sovereignty has been deeply challenged and where a penetrated system struggles to formulate all-encompassing national priorities, non-state actors come to play an important role in providing security and stability and in producing alliances across sects, communities and other groups that involve territorial and resource-related considerations.

The main objective of armed organizations – and Hezbollah is fundamentally a military institution – is to create security or buffer zones. When the Syrians controlled security questions in Lebanon during the 1990s, Hezbollah was shielded from such concerns and could concentrate on its ‘Resistance Project’. After the Syrian withdrawal of 2005, Hezbollah was forced to fill the gap and take on various political and security tasks. During this period, Hezbollah’s political and military project has been attacked by different sets of actors from both within and outside Lebanon. As the various security incidents unfolded, Hezbollah slowly pushed into either controlling certain key state institutions or negotiating new agreements that would safeguard its project. In May 2008, after the ruling coalition decided to shut Hezbollah’s highly sensitive telecommunications network, the latter clashed with the Mustaqbal Party’s militia in Beirut and successfully disarmed it overnight under the watchful eye of the Lebanese Army, who only intervened to collect the weapons confiscated by Hezbollah. And in 2009, a United Nations (UN) Special Tribunal set up to investigate the assassination of Hariri indicted some Hezbollah members, giving Hezbollah’s main opponents another card to play against it.

This on-going ‘local’ conflict is crucial to understanding Hezbollah’s subsequent military involvement in Syria. In the speech mentioned earlier, held at a moment of heightened tension, Nasrallah addresses his Lebanese counterparts by asking: ‘You are fighting in Syria? We are fighting in Syria? Let’s just fight each other there! But Lebanon is going to melt. Let’s keep Lebanon neutral.’ This reference to the neutral stance that Lebanon should endorse in order to preserve a stable confessional and political make-up is a traditional national narrative in the country. But here, Hezbollah adds to it a novel element when he invites his Lebanese counterparts to produce this stability by exporting conflicts on other grounds, thus merging the isolationist paradigm praised by most Lebanese elites during the twentieth century with Hezbollah’s ‘Resistance Project’.

For Hezbollah, moving the 'security' battle beyond Lebanon's frontier was clearly preferable to jeopardizing the shaky political and confessional equilibrium in the country. I argue that, to understand Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, we must take into account such considerations, which are revealing of the extent to which non-state actors fulfil state functions and struggle to produce 'sovereignties', or to control the means of coercion over either different state-delineated territories, or simply specific regions within states. Like most state or quasi-state actors, Hezbollah struggles to keep the 'local' stable and exports the resolution of conflict on other grounds where possible. The withdrawal of the Syrian army gave it an opportunity to increasingly adopt the security position of a state. This did not just give the organization the bargaining power to impose a specific status quo on the various political parties and coalitions inside Lebanon, it also forced it to demonstrate a 'national' stand over basic security questions (a vision of a common enemy, foreign-policy priorities, a national defence program, etc.). It is in this sense that the 'regional' was exploited for 'local' ends, which is one of the least understood dimensions of Hezbollah's *modus operandi*.

Although the fact that the Lebanese Army is mostly aligned with Hezbollah on overall security issues may explain why certain Sunni officers are disgruntled, it is important to recognize that, from the former's point of view, the 'security' danger that radical Sunni groups represent has been increasing since as early as the immediate aftermath of the Iraqi war, and not just because of Hezbollah's hegemonic tendencies. Noteworthy is that one of the theories about Hariri's assassination (along with other subsequent assassinations) points to radical Salafi cells as being responsible. The McDonald Jounieh explosion, for example, which took place as early as 2002, involved a transnational assortment of actors and Palestinian camps. In addition, the north of Lebanon has been a fertile ground for such individuals and groups to grow during the later part of the 1990s until today.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of this, the relationship between the Lebanese Army and Hezbollah is arguably more symbiotic than confrontational. One symptom of this is that radical armed Sunni groups have targeted the Lebanese Army several times, one of the reasons given being a perception that the Army was complicit with Hezbollah, if not controlled by it. But there is an important difference between, on the one hand, the local rationales of Sunni powers, and on the other, transnational 'jihadi' groups including many foreign elements who are not specifically sensitive to local political issues. Indeed, it may be more important to see how local groups try to exploit the presence of such transnational movements in order to voice local sectarian or

communitarian demands. Hezbollah seems to be separating both issues judiciously in turning the local into an albeit reluctant partner and branding the transnational as terrorist. Again, the Syrian field has enabled Hezbollah to confront its regional enemy, first encountered in Iraq, outside of Lebanese territory, leaving the task of controlling it to the Lebanese army.

The Lebanese Army has thus fought, to a large extent on its own, radical Sunni groups on Lebanese soil (especially in the northern town of Arsal) and has been facing increasing attacks by these groups, starting with the Nahr al Bared camp war, and proceeding to the more recent show-down with Sheikh Ahmad Assir of Saida, who led a small group of armed men to stage attacks against Lebanese Army positions in 2013. There were reports that in these battles Hezbollah's fighters were seen helping the Army. Assir was also reportedly seen in Qusayr, encouraging fighters to cross the Lebanese border and fight Hezbollah there. This shows the heightened alignment of interests between the Army and Hezbollah in their management and representation of frontiers.

The Lebanese Army focuses on maintaining a stable 'internal' climate, whereas Hezbollah moves to create buffer zones in the border areas and occasionally carries out strategic incursions into the Syrian hinterland. Hezbollah also confronts its regional enemies on diplomatic, political and sometimes military fronts in other places such as Iraq and Yemen by providing logistical support and training, but also on occasion through actual military intervention. Meanwhile the Lebanese Army is benefiting from the creation of safe zones across the border that isolate the Arsal incident from the broader Homs region – a point made by General Jean Qahwaji of the Lebanese Armed Forces<sup>3</sup> – where the Syrian regime battled Jubhat al Nusra and other opposition groups for some years until December 2015, when the last of the Al-Qaeda group's forces withdrew.

Hezbollah faces a regional enemy that moves over time through several localities. The enemy is perceived as regional because Hezbollah depends on a regional alliance of states to protect its military organization. This involves, among other things, a friendly regime in Iraq, as well as in Syria. For Hezbollah, threats to its allies in Iraq are not just a threat because they are its allies, but also because its 'enemies' in Iraq are part of a movement that is regional and highly mobile, surfacing at times in Lebanon and at other times in Syria, depending on the security situation. Its latest show of support for the Yemeni opposition and involvement in conflict is a case in point. One symptom of weak sovereignties is their consequences for the porousness

of 'national' boundaries. Interlinked security fields are followed by a regionalized representation of an enemy that is also highly mobile and whose resources are transferred from one place to the other as a response to threats and opportunities.

In one sense also, Hezbollah has acted similarly to how the Syrian regime has behaved since the fall of Baghdad, when it facilitated the channelling of fighters through its frontiers to Iraq, but also to Lebanon. Shaker al-Absi, the leader of Fath al Islam, was in a Syrian jail before being freed in 2002. And yet before this episode, Syria had a long history of confrontation and compromise with Sunni groups in Tripoli and the wider northern area (as well as Saida and the Palestinian camps). The Syrian regime exported the problem of dealing with Islamists by moving them (to a certain extent) from Hama to Lebanon in 1982. Uncertainty was curtailed outside the realms of state sovereignty. Predictably enough, the north of Lebanon became a hotbed of Syrian opposition activity, especially after the Syrian Army's withdrawal.<sup>4</sup>

For most of the past two decades, states and non-state actors in the region chose to resolve security questions by moving the battle from one place to another and by trying to control actors rather than eliminate them. The constraints and opportunities offered by the regionalization of politics opened up possibilities for states to produce all kinds of advantageous positions that they could not otherwise manage with the sole help of their local security apparatuses. Yet because the process always escaped the explicit control of states, this policy has proved a double-edged sword, as exemplified by the post-2011 events in Syria, the swift success of Jubhat al Nusra and the overwhelming 'Islamic' imprint on opposition militant activities. Yet to argue that Syria (or Iran in Iraq) 'created' the Islamist cells that then developed into Nusra or IS once they had returned from Iraq is overly simplistic.<sup>5</sup>

In effect, the Syrian regime acted like any other state in the region, although the relationship between the various states and non-state actors was very different. Relations between Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the US and the various armed groups in Syria depended on a multitude of factors, such as power struggles within these political regimes and their different security institutions, but also the capacity of private donors from the Gulf to find their way to Syria (encouraged or not by local authorities).<sup>6</sup>



## SUNNI RADICAL MILITANT ORGANIZATIONS AND SECTARIAN POLITICS

Non-state actors facing the 'Resistance Axis', which brings together Iran, the Syrian regime and Hezbollah, have a slightly different *modus operandi* than groups such as Hezbollah. Radical Sunni groups, for lack of a better term, have much less of the political cohesive security interest of the Resistance Axis that would tie them into a firm alliance. Although they may have been trained in similar locations or had experiences with ordinary fighters in Iraq or Afghanistan, Radical Sunni groups are unconnected. There isn't a clear historical continuity between their members, as they emanate from individual or small group initiatives according to context or political episodes, and even if they may retrieve financial and logistical backings from similar sources over time.

One point of continuity, however, between most of these groups is their virulently anti-Shi'i stance, their politics of 'the near enemy is the greater enemy', a politics first dramatically put into practice by Zarqawi's group in Iraq. In line with a general trend in Wahhabi strands of Islamic teaching, Shi'i Muslims are apostates or *kafir*, and it is lawful to kill them (in certain interpretations). Wahhabism, the state-sponsored version of Islam in Saudi Arabia, has not put these initial teaching of its leader Ibn Wahhab, who started the puritan movement in the nineteenth century, into practice. But this Salafi current has kept dormant a general anti-Shi'i attitude, which has found a more radical form with organizations such as al-Nusra and IS. This act of rendering someone a *kafer* has been called *takfir*, and so movements who practice this have been labelled *takfiri*, especially by the groups they target such as Hezbollah. I would not conclude, as some commentators have done, that this label is a sectarian one. Although Hezbollah may have engaged in sectarian calculations, labelling organizations by the actions they engage in is not what makes them sectarian. Zarqawi, and later IS and al-Nusra (two offshoots of Zarqawi's AQI), used a sectarian strategy of division in order to gain political leverage that is drastically different from Hezbollah sectarianism, which is mostly defensive. However, defensive attitudes can involve, and in this case have involved, offensive actions, in line with what international relations scholars would call offensive realism.

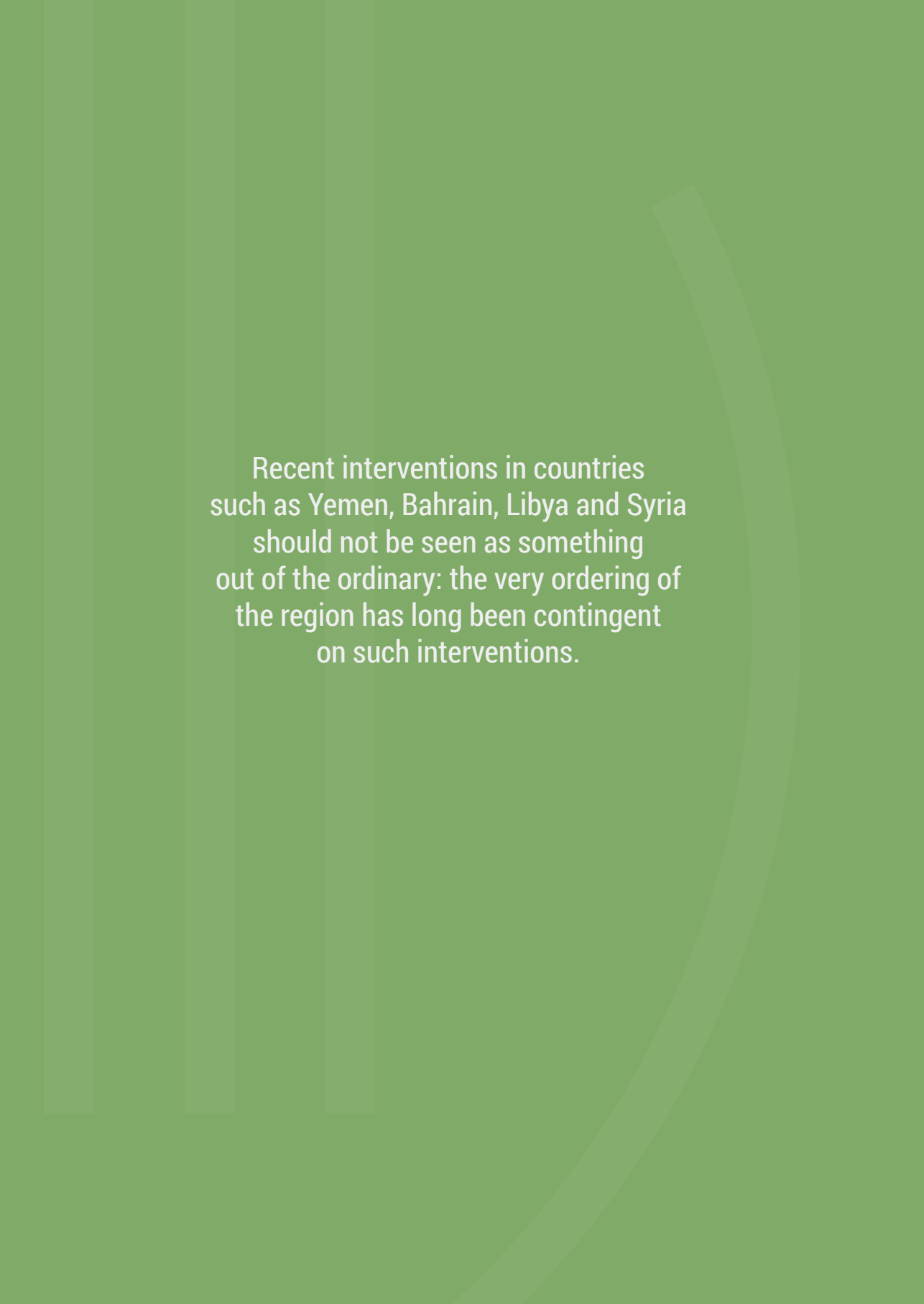
As a result, *takfiri* groups tend to act slightly differently from other non-state actors such as Hezbollah, who have sizable popular representation and are linked to existing states. Even if they have an inclination to provide security in the territory they control, they tend to find strategic advantage in destabilizing their enemies by

all means possible. The recruits to these groups mostly come from foreign locations and transnational networks, not from the immediate population that is being governed or administered. Thus, lacking the long-nurtured interaction with a constituency from which they draw resources and potential recruits, their discourse can afford to be more 'radical' and appealing to actors who come from all corners of the globe and are connected through internet-based social media. In so doing, they are more likely to develop sectarian slogans that call for the annihilation of the other, especially because they start from a weaker position and are attempting to challenge a prevailing political status quo that is framed along sectarian lines, facilitating the targeting of an enemy and mobilizing against it. This process was first started in Iraq by the ancestor of IS and Jubhat al Nusra, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), led by Abu Musab al Zarqawi, a radical fighter whose methods Osama Ben Laden would view as 'extremist' and would lead virulent anti-Shi'i attacks in the face of what was seen as Iran's increasing interference in Iraqi affairs.

Apart from having this regional dimension, aided by the use of new media technology, the politics of sectarianism should also be understood as involving a struggle over meaning, and in this case a struggle over the 'existence' or 'raison d'être' of communities. Hard-line Salafi-inspired movements brand the Shi'i sect as non-Muslim and thus lawful to kill. This is definitely the effect of a strategy of atomization, of dividing in order to gain leverage within weak sovereignties. In contrast, Hezbollah and the 'Resistance Axis', which is trying to preserve an institutional arrangement has developed over time an inclusive discourse that is only sectarian inasmuch as it aims to protect community identification across the board. Through its long experience in Lebanon and complex relationship with the state, Hezbollah has invested heavily in 'intra-faith' types of initiative, bringing together the different heads and representatives of religious communities. Today, Hezbollah-related media are investing in a massive media, intellectual and juridical campaign to demonstrate that these groups are not preserving the legacy of the Prophet and thus have strayed from this tradition, although Hezbollah is careful not to call takfiri groups kuffar or infidels, as they are against this type of argumentative strategy in principle, from both religious and political points of view. Since Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen, most diplomatic restraints have been removed, and in his frequent public appearances Nasrallah openly argues that Wahhabism, IS and Al-Qaeda are all one and the same.

The fight against takfiri movements involves a conflict of identity, or at least a conflict over the meanings and practices that shape community delineations. Although this conflict develops and changes over time and does not rest on 'fixed' or 'rigid' ahistorical identities, it is nonetheless virulent, as it creates a heightened ideological climate in order to articulate modes of action that permit gains on the ground. As a result, much of the war is fought through the media, thus providing an added rationale for the politics of sectarianism, as it proclaims a discourse of the annihilation of the other as a people, tradition or community. Clear, radical and binary representations are the 'real' implications of tactics such as the bombing of civilian areas and ethnic cleansing. They operate a politics of spectacle that has a full impact the more the image produced presents clear contrasts.

- 1 Hassan Nasrallah, Televised Speech, 25 May, 2013.
- 2 The works of Bernard Rougier are especially relevant in this regard. See Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam among Palestinians in Lebanon* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 2007); also Bernard Rougier, *The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East: Northern Lebanon from Al-Qaeda to ISIS*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- 3 Lebanese Army General Jean Kahwagi in an interview with the Lebanese Newspaper Al-Akhbar <http://al-akhbar.com/node/252479> (last accessed: 2016-02-25)
- 4 For a detailed overview of the relationship between north Lebanon's Sunni community and the Syrians, see Tine Gade, 2015, 'Sunni Islamists in Tripoli and the Asad Regime 1966-2014', *Syria Studies*, 7(2), pp. 20-65.
- 5 As a rebuttal of this theory, developed in books such as Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, *Inside the Army of Terror* (Regan Arts. 2015), as well as Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad* (Hurst & cCo. 2016), see Bernard Rougier, *L'Oumma en Fragment* (PUF 2011).
- 6 Salafist networks, from the most quietist to the more violent, can be sponsored either by states or by private donors.

The background is a solid green color. It features several vertical stripes of varying shades of green, creating a textured effect. A large, thin, curved line, also in a shade of green, sweeps across the right side of the image, starting from the top and curving downwards.

Recent interventions in countries  
such as Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria  
should not be seen as something  
out of the ordinary: the very ordering of  
the region has long been contingent  
on such interventions.

## **Intervention and the Arab Uprisings**

# **FROM TRANSFORMATION TO MAINTENANCE OF REGIONAL ORDER**

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**By Karim Makdisi**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter explores the question of intervention during the Arab uprisings, which promised so much that one scholar boldly stated: 'quite literally [there has] never been a moment of such potential in the Arab world.'<sup>1</sup> However, as events moved from the euphoria of the early mass movements in Tunisia and Egypt demanding democracy to the increasingly prominent role of foreign players intervening directly in Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria, it is important we reflect on the longer history and meaning of intervention in the Middle East itself.

This chapter charts this evolution, arguing that intervention is constitutive of both international and regional orders, not exogenous to them. As such, the main struggle to determine a particular order pits those seeking to transform it against those battling to maintain it. Moments of crises occur when there is a challenge to the existing forces and power structures that maintain stability, as occurred during these uprisings. It should be noted from the outset that this chapter does not deny or question the agency of local actors, whether liberal, leftist or Islamist, throughout these uprisings, nor their very real grievances as they struggle against authoritarian and military regimes, as well as the political and financial networks that sustain them. These national movements are examined in other chapters in this volume. Rather, this chapter focuses on the international dimensions of this situation, making the point that the 'international' is always present.

## INTERVENTION AS CONSTITUTIVE OF INTERNATIONAL ORDERS

As Luca Tardelli and George Lawson remind us, conceptually intervention is constitutive of the very formation and evolution of such orders. It is, they argue, an 'enduring social practice' that is fundamental to how core strands of the international order have spread around the world, rather than an 'exceptional practice vis-à-vis the norm of non-intervention,' as perhaps the United Nations Charter would have us believe.<sup>2</sup> Seen in this light, we can think of intervention as being deployed in two apparently contrasting ways: as a tool of 'order transformation', and as a means of 'order maintenance.'<sup>3</sup> However, how such intervention is understood, legitimized and implemented has evolved from the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe (in which the Great Powers used intervention to maintain order in the core and transform polities and economies in the periphery) to the Cold War superpower rivalry in the third world, represented as a clash between different 'regimes of global intervention.'<sup>4</sup> In this latter form of intervention, the aim of both the US and the Soviet Union was largely to keep the bipolar order stable (at least until the mid-1980s), while creating proxy wars and crushing post-colonial struggles for transformations of order based on third-world solidarity and a new international economic order based on economic and resource sovereignty for all.<sup>5</sup>

In early post-Cold War terms, the 'liberal peace' became the key instrument of intervention with an even clearer North-South direction. What set this project apart from the bulk of Cold-War interventionism during the moment of US global hegemony was its transformative aspect, mainly pursued through peace- and state-building projects in the third world organized around neoliberal principles. The concept of sovereignty, the cornerstone of the United Nations charter acknowledged in principle as sacrosanct by the major powers during the Cold War, now became overtly more fluid. The transformation of UN peace operations during this period clearly illustrate this fluidity, as 'traditional' Cold-War peacekeeping explicitly relied on the consent of the state in which the intervention was taking place (as an affirmation of sovereignty) and effectively served as a Great Power tool to stabilize a regional order threatened with collapse, as, for instance, in the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The UN 'Agenda for Peace' document promulgated by then Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1992 institutionalized and legitimized a liberal approach to intervention that would move its focus away from Cold-War notions of inter-state mediation and conflict resolution to the search for the root causes of conflicts

by reconstituting what were now deemed 'weak' or 'failed' states. As Toby Dodge argues, this new approach to peacebuilding was given 'ideational and instrumental coherence' by linking the main drivers of increased humanitarian suffering and conflict to the 'sins' of the state itself.<sup>6</sup> In Africa and Asia, UN peace operations now dealt with state-building exercises such as amending constitutions, arranging and monitoring elections, security-sector reform and the promotion of civil society. Despite the limitations of these concepts of intervention, which were dramatically exposed during the massacres in Rwanda and Srebrenica during the 1990s, countries of the North nonetheless employed the same logic to justify the doctrine of humanitarian intervention in Kosovo and beyond, a doctrine which in turn was transformed into the more contemporary and seemingly less threatening concept of the responsibility to protect (R2P). The 'war on terror' taken up in earnest by the US under President George W. Bush following the September 11, 2001, attacks made good use of this interventionist turn in the post-Cold War period, turning security issues into legitimate *casus belli* for dismantling and rebuilding states, or parts of states.

## **EARLY PROMISE OF THE UPRISINGS: NATIONAL TRANSFORMATIONS**

The early promise of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings for the rest of the Arab region was two-fold. The first promise was the relatively non-violent removal of authoritarian regimes, the resulting restoration of 'dignity', and a more inclusive, democratic politics based on social justice. This would be powered by modern communications technology and social media that could link hitherto fragmented communities. In late 2011 Mahmoud Mamdani, a leading authority on political violence, explained that the moral force of the non-violent mass protests in Tahrir Square made possible a 'new politics' that does 'not just resist and exclude. It also embraces and includes.'<sup>7</sup> In this case, secular and Islamist forces from various classes presumably colluded for the greater good. The people in these revolutionary states, imagined in these early euphoric days of Sidi Buzid and Tahrir Square, were cast as free at last and as moving inexorably forward through a process of democratization. As one of the early international stars of the Egyptian uprising, Wael Ghonim of Google fame, concluded, 'Today empowered young Egyptians know they are capable of shaping the future of their country, truly believing that it is theirs.'<sup>8</sup>

A second, related early promise of the uprisings was the insistence on their national character and agency and the rejection of the notion that international calculus or outside intervention was the driving force behind them. The scholar and journalist Vijay Prashad argued that the will and agency of ordinary people overshadowed the desire of the US establishment media to 'give glory' to Facebook or Obama's 2009 Cairo speech, or even the then oft-cited handbook of non-violent resistance by the philosopher Gene Sharp.<sup>9</sup> Olivier Roy, a leading authority on political Islam, wrote in mid-2012 that the Arab Spring's 'irreversible' process of democratization is 'both acceptable and desirable' since it was the result of a 'succession of indigenous upheavals...delinked from Western encroachments.'<sup>10</sup> He echoed many analysts at the time by stating that 'ritual denunciations of imperialism – including the usual condemnations decrying Zionism as the source of all the Arab world's troubles – were so remarkably absent from the demonstrations.' Interestingly, for Roy, the fact that the protests were centered on particular nation states and free from international influence also explained why 'al-Qaeda is out of the picture' except on the very fringes of the Arab world: 'The uprooted global jihadist is no longer a model for young activists and fails to find many takers when he seeks to enlist local militants for the global cause.'<sup>12</sup> The jihadists, seen in this light, were an unwanted intervention from the outside and were thus illegitimate actors during the uprisings.

Indeed, many progressive analysts asserted that, rather than representing international interference in national struggles, the reverse was true: Arab protests reinvigorated and linked up with other such bottom-up global protests, such as the Occupy Wall Street movement, against the neoliberal order. Writing in late 2011, Koenraad Bogaert asserted that the global dimension of the Arab uprisings' most important achievement was that 'what started in Tunisia has now created space on a global scale to question and contest neoliberal hegemony.'<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the scholar Adam Hanieh used the lens of class struggle to argue that the Egyptian uprising represented both a 'link to the chain of protests that have erupted over the last three years in the wake of the global economic crisis' and Egypt's role in sustaining US domination in the region.<sup>13</sup>

## **THE COUNTERATTACK: REGIONALLY MANAGED TRANSFORMATION AND STABILITY WITHIN US-APPROVED LIMITS**

Despite this early justifiable optimism, the counter-attack by external forces against the transformative potential of people power and agency was swift, first indirectly by influencing national elections and policies, and then more assertively and directly.



What is interesting is that, as many lamented, or celebrated, the apparent 'retreat' of the hitherto dominant United States from the region in the shadow of the post-2003 Iraq War era, more autonomous regional state players, seemingly less reliant on US initiative or direct approval, appeared to take the lead in the early shaping of a new regional order. Indeed, in this sense the early movers, Turkey and Qatar in particular, could make the case that, rather than constituting foreign intervention, their roles represented a continuum of transnational cultural, social and political networks, centered on the Muslim Brothers' agenda and working both between and across national boundaries. Saudi Arabia would claim the same with regard to their support of Salafist movements across the region during this period.

This chapter, however, contends that Western powers allowed this regionally guided Islamist transformation in so far as it was managed by its allies, namely Turkey and the Gulf States, and did not threaten its main interests in the region, primarily oil infrastructure, but also Israel and its Arab partners. Turkey initially assumed it would serve as the key regional hegemon during this transformation, given its status as a Western-approved model demonstrating the compatibility of Islam, democracy and (neo) liberalism. Turkey's main vehicles in these national projects were the Muslim Brothers, also supported and financed by Qatar. The shared goal of both these states was to manage, even shape, the transformation of the region. The early An-Nahda and Freedom and Justice parties' ascents to power in early 2011 through national elections in Tunisia and Egypt respectively exemplified the transformation of the Arab order in which the external component was clear, and approved, but channelled through selected popular national political parties.

This is not to say that external powers fully controlled or manipulated these elections: certainly a spectrum of political parties – including the Brothers, but also other liberal, leftist and Salafist ones – asserted agency and popular legitimacy borne out of their long struggles against the authoritarian Bin Ali and Mubarak regimes. Indeed, it was the trade unions and proposed leftist national development plans, as well as popular anti-Israeli sentiment, that arguably constituted the real threat to the perceived interests of the West. As such, managed Islamist rule – foreshadowed by President Obama's celebrated 2009 Cairo speech on the eve of the Egyptian uprising – was tolerated and accepted as inevitable. To this end, the United Nations limited itself to happy words welcoming the Arab peoples to the global liberal project that promised freedom for all and to providing assorted technical support for the elections.

However, the Islamists' space for internal manoeuvre, in post-uprising Egypt in particular, was constrained by their regional patrons' financing and protection, as well as Western states and international financial organizations' demands for the continuation of neoliberal reforms and austerity policies. In other words, their project was largely a nation-state one focused, at least initially, on social and cultural programs that would extend and institutionalize their influence, rather than constitute an open challenge to the security and economic pillars of the regional order. Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi, for example, explicitly reassured Israel of his intention to faithfully respect Egyptian-Israeli agreements and controversially dispatched an Ambassador to Tel Aviv carrying an improbably congenial letter from Morsi himself.

Such indirect interference soon mutated into a more aggressive form of intervention, as popular uprisings that became increasingly messy – in the sense of unpredictable and not managed by either a Western-approved national elite nor their foreign patrons – broke out in Libya, Yemen Bahrain, and Syria. Qatar once again positioned itself early on as the most vocal and active potential Arab leader during this second post-uprising phase, which ended in 2013. It swiftly shed its long-cultivated public role as a regional, impartial mediator that it had carefully cultivated over the previous decade – financing and convening peace talks between, for instance, rival leaders from Lebanon's March 14 and March 8 groups, and those of Fatah and Hamas in Palestine – and adopted a significantly more partisan and militaristic strategy during the uprisings. Qatar's role was convenient for the West, as it provided the kind of regional cover – Arab solutions for Arab problems – that the US desired during Obama's 'leading from behind' strategy<sup>14</sup>, though, as we shall see below, this would later set up an internal tussle within the Gulf Cooperation Council with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

Qatar used its pulpit as the Arab League's president during the crucial period from 2011 to 2012 to shape the League's belligerent agenda towards Libya, remote to most Arabs, and with a deeply unpopular leader. Libya was duly expelled in March 2011, the first such expulsion since Egypt was banished following its unilateral peace treaty with Israel in 1978. Qatar also mobilized Arab League cover to legitimize the NATO-led military intervention that first imposed a no-fly zone over Libya and later effected unilateral regime change in Libya. It even intervened directly in Libya using both hard power (via military intervention and the deployment of special

forces) and soft power (using the then considerable influence of the state-controlled Al-Jazeera Arabic news channel on Arab public opinion). As in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, Qatar's objective was to set up a friendly Islamist regime in line with a Western-approved international framework.

Qatar was also instrumental in de-legitimizing the regime of Syria's Bashar al-Assad during the early period of protests and pushing the Arab League to suspend Syria's membership in November 2011. Two months later, following the failure of the Arab League's Observer Mission to stem the violence and the deadlock in the UN Security Council, Qatar's Emir formally called for Arab military intervention in Syria. At the same time, it coordinated a more activist Arab position in the Security Council, which by early 2012 had become the main international venue dealing with the Syrian conflict.

Turkey too had abandoned its very brief role as mediator in Syria after Bashar al-Assad rejected its proposal to manage the Assad regime's transition out of power in favour of an Islamist-dominated coalition. Along with Qatar, Turkey played a key role in 2011-2012 in recognizing, hosting and funding Syrian opposition figures and groups, soon becoming the most vocal regional player to call for intervention and proposing a no-fly zone over northern Syria.

## **THE UNRAVELLING OF THE REGION: WARS OF COMPETING TRANSFORMATION**

Saudi Arabia, initially on the backbenches as it grappled with the implications of the Egyptian, Libyan and Syrian uprisings, became increasingly alarmed at the unravelling of a regional order in which it had long played a hegemonic role with US support and protection. While it allowed Qatar to take the lead in more distant uprisings, the Saudis focused instead on the more urgent threat closer to home and sought to quell unrest in the Gulf, including its own Eastern Provinces. They therefore led the Gulf States in a military intervention in Bahrain in March 2011 to suppress persistent protests against its close ally King Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa, who then imposed a state of emergency. In neighbouring Yemen, with which it shares a long and porous border, in April 2011 the Saudis brokered a deal to stem the large-scale popular uprising against the long rule of another ally, President Ali Abdallah Saleh, and to prevent that state's collapse.

Overall, then, in the early phase of the uprisings, Saudi Arabia and its main Gulf ally the United Arab Emirates (UAE) wanted to ensure an outcome compatible with their main concern at this stage, maintaining regional stability. However, they increasingly resented and agitated against the Turkish-Qatari ascent to regional power, these two states' backing for the Muslim Brothers, and the potential threat that such transformation might pose to their standing and interests in the region. As early as 2011, the UAE joined the NATO coalition in intervening militarily in Libya with the important goal of blocking the Qatari-supported consolidation of Muslim Brother power there after the war. Even by late 2016, with the corpse of the Libyan state still being torn apart, Qatar and the UAE support different militias and political groupings. More importantly, the Saudis and the Emirates eventually supported the July 2013 military coup in Egypt that deposed the elected, though increasingly erratic, Muslim Brother President Morsi. They cemented this alliance by providing billions of dollars of aid to Egypt – blocked during Morsi's tenure – to shore up the military government, which faced overwhelming poverty, unemployment and a myriad of social problems, as well as a restless population. The Saudis invested over \$20 billion in core strategic projects, including around the Suez Canal, the upgrading of energy infrastructure and the setting up of a free trade zone in the Sinai Peninsula, where the military government faces an Islamist insurgency.<sup>15</sup> The UAE followed suit with similar investments. This power shift was cemented when the activist Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani, suddenly abdicated at the end of June 2013 in favour of his young son Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, who, while continuing his father's overall policies, took a more behind-the-scenes approach.

If the Qatari ascent in the region in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings irked Saudi Arabia, the latter increasingly feared a rising, more active Iran that had benefitted from the loosening of the Saudi grip in the Middle East. The US dismantling of the Iraqi state in 2003 had already made the Saudis deeply insecure with regard to Iran, and this was compounded following the success of Hezbollah in Lebanon during the 2006 war with Israel, which greatly increased the Lebanese Resistance's standing throughout the Arab region and further strengthened Iran geopolitically. The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Saudi Arabia's key partner in Lebanon, in Beirut in 2004 symbolized the demise of Saudi influence in the Levant. More importantly, the Bush administration's war on terror strategy had by 2007-2008 visibly failed in stemming Iran's influence in the region. The Saudis felt increasingly betrayed by the US under President Obama's tenure, with the latter apparently disengaging from the region even as he authorized negotiations with Iran to reach a nuclear deal, and he turned down calls from the Gulf States for military intervention in Syria.

An insecure Saudi Arabia, now forging a strategic alliance with Israel against Iran, increasingly resorted to a violent sectarian discourse to stem 'Shi'a' (read Iranian) power in predominantly 'Sunni' (read Arab) areas. The shift of power within Saudi Arabia, with the accession of Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud first as Crown Prince (2012) and then as King (2015), exacerbated sectarian tensions. In Yemen, the mooted transition of President Saleh's power to his vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi (who has since been under Saudi and UAE protection), failed; and Yemeni Houthi (Zeidi) rebels subsequently rejected a proposal for the federalization of the country. Accusing Iran of supporting the Houthis, in 2015 Saudi Arabia responded by leading a coalition of Arab (more explicitly self-identified as 'Sunni') allies in invading Yemen and, in the process, creating a humanitarian catastrophe in the midst of a civil war. Saudi Arabia also increased its support for Syrian Islamist rebels, including various extremist jihadi groups, during this period, thus ratcheting up the sectarian war with the Alawite' Assad regime and helping to squeeze out Qatari- and Turkish-backed opposition groups. During this period, the Saudis increased pressure on Lebanon, perceived to be controlled by the Shia'a Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia also rescinded its four-billion-dollar military aid package to the Lebanese armed forces, withdrew from various large-scale investment projects and expelled many Lebanese expatriates working in the Gulf.

By 2015, then, the early transformative promise of the uprisings, with their uplifting discourse of and demands for freedom, dignity and justice, had been well and truly squashed by wider regional struggles. The regional battle lines were first drawn up between a Qatari- and Turkish-managed transformation project on the one hand and a more conservative Saudi project striving for basic stability. After 2013, the proxy war in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran had become the main, though by no means the only battle, and it is within these lines that various non-state actors, such as Hezbollah, Islamic State (IS) and Kurdish separatists, gained more leverage, power and standing. To remedy this loss of control to non-state players, the international community, including the US and Turkey, have been resuscitating state projects not only in Libya and Yemen, but now also in Syria. It remains to be seen how the post-Obama presidency will shape the Middle East or precipitate inevitable shifts in local and regional alliances (such as Egypt's recent cooling of relations with Saudi Arabia).

## INTERVENTIONS AS CONSTITUTIVE OF ARAB ORDERS

My argument in this chapter is that the swift counter-attack by external forces during the Arab uprisings against the latter's transformative (national) potential is a 'normal' international policy reaction by powerful states and interests to an undesirable transformation of the regional order. Such a policy has a long history in the region, one that needs to be examined in order to avoid de-historicizing the period of the Arab uprisings.

For the Arab world, intervention has been a 'normal' international policy for well over a hundred years. UK-French connivance quashed Arab aspirations to transform the region by means of a unified Arab state, and the League of Nations instead imposed mandates on various Arab states, despite earlier promises of self-determination. The 1917 Balfour Declaration and the 1947 UN partition plan legitimized Zionist claims that ripped Palestine from the heart of the Arab world problematized the Levant's tradition of communal co-existence, and created the first mass refugee crisis in the region, while the forces of the British mandate worked to crush Palestinian resistance and destroy their institutions and infrastructure. Throughout the Cold War, Western policy in the Middle East focused on breaking Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism in favour of protecting the more conservative and oil-dependent states in the Gulf, defeating revolutionary or anti-colonial movements in places such as Algeria and Palestine, neutralizing Iraq and Iran in an unprecedented war of attrition, and solidifying Israel's grip over the region, particularly after the decisive Six-day War in 1967.

The advent of the liberal peace during the 1990s largely eschewed liberalstate-building and democratization in the Arab world, as this would have destabilized authoritarian regimes in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and the Gulf Cooperation Council states, which were serving Western interests and protecting their oil supplies. What popular civil society-led opposition to these regimes existed – whether secular as in the case of Tunisia or Yemen or Islamist as predominately in Egypt – was left to its own devices in calling for social justice. Instead, international intervention during this period focused on economic and social issues and was channelled through international organizations such as the IMF, World Bank and the UNDP in the form of neoliberal, market-based reforms. These reforms in turn led to deepening poverty, greater inequality, higher unemployment (especially among the young) and food insecurity, as well as dramatic levels of migration from rural to urban areas. In effect, neoliberal policies ultimately weakened these states and

their service-provision capacity dramatically, exposing their dependence on global economic and financial forces. As Rami Zurayk has persuasively argued, the 2008 global food crisis capped this period and created an environmental 'catastrophe' that made the Arab world 'ripe' for insurrection: in short, it led to a tipping point in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Yemen.<sup>16</sup>

International state-building interventions during the 1990s are also illustrated by the case of Palestine, whose revolutionary cause and potentially transformative struggle had long enjoyed mass support across the Arab and Muslim worlds. Already the 1967 war had crushed Arab aspirations to stem the tide of Zionism, while the neutralization of Egypt in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict through its 1979 peace treaty signalled the end of any lingering and meaningful Arab threat to Israel. Following Western support for the suppression of the popular uprising (intifada) against the Israeli occupation during the late 1980s and the co-optation of the Palestinian leadership in exile, the US introduced a stage-managed 'peace process' sealed during the secret 1993 Oslo negotiations. In effect, these negotiations protected Israel's security interests and pacified the Palestinians by creating a comprador class reliant on Gulf capital and a Palestinian Authority tasked with subduing Palestinians in terms of both security (with Israeli and US help) and the economy (aided by largely European-funded NGO investment and World Bank projects).<sup>17</sup> However, rather than leading to a Palestinian state in accordance with the final goal of the Oslo process, Jewish settlements and colonies more than doubled in the designated Palestinian-controlled territories even as the land was carved up into small, non-contiguous enclaves and surrounded by an imposing wall.<sup>18</sup> After the economic and political failure of Oslo, in 2002 the US introduced a 'Road Map' with the ostensible goal of, once again, creating a Palestinian state, though only if the Palestinians met the impossible bar of providing security for Israel and enacting (neo-)liberal 'reforms.' The UN provided the veneer of legitimacy to this Road Map process by its involvement in the 'Quartet', which also included the US, Russia and the EU.

The 'war on terror' launched in earnest by the George W. Bush administration following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the US opened a new, more direct and more militaristic phase of international intervention designed aggressively to transform the Arab world. The putative objective was that the combination of weak states and the success of the 'axis of evil' headed by Iran had created the conditions for terrorists to operate with impunity. The intervention thus required 'fixing' both of these by force, including the newly promulgated 'Bush Doctrine' of pre-emptive

strikes that comprised a serious challenge to the core of the post-WW2 international order and the UN Charter. Armed with world sympathy and a controversial (though vague) UN Security Council Resolution that effectively allowed the US to attack the Taliban and Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan under the guise of self-defence, the Bush administration's real intentions were revealed during the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq. While regime change and supporting Iraqi 'democratic opposition organizations' had already become official US policy with the passage of the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998, the Bush administration had already pledged to implement this act fully before the September 11 attacks.

Under the putative justification of ridding Iraq of weapons of mass destruction and ending President Saddam Hussein's support of terrorism, the US and United Kingdom launched a full-scale invasion that destroyed Iraqi infrastructure and inflicted one of the worst humanitarian disasters on a people that had already been crippled by two decades of sanctions. In the aftermath of the war, the US began a state-building project by dismantling state institutions and Iraq's armed forces, an act that directly led to the catastrophic civil war and rise of groups such as IS. The point is that the US intervention established a model of state-building by force. The Bush administration then turned its gaze on Syria (including Lebanon, which it considered a Syrian proxy) and Iran, as well as Hezbollah, a major irritant to Israel – with the intention of imposing this new model of forced state-building that could both protect its Gulf allies and enable Israeli hegemony to continue. However, this plan ultimately failed after its strongly supported Israeli war on Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006 and sanctions on Syria and Iran all failed, with Iraq also in a state of deep turmoil. Its intention to transform the regional order had backfired, leaving Iran and its allies increasingly influential instead. This in turn created a sense of deep insecurity in the Gulf, particularly in Saudi Arabia. The Arab uprisings brought this tension to the surface.

## **REASSESSING INTERVENTION DURING THE ARAB UPRISING**

What intervention often needs is an overall framework to justify or legitimize it. I argue that, while such frameworks often overlap, a single dominant framework tends to emerge. This dominant framework shifted in the post-Cold War Arab world from neoliberalism to a militarized, state-building project following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. While the Arab uprisings briefly highlighted the existence of a complementary framework based on humanitarianism, this was transformed once



more into a 'terrorism' framework with the rise of IS and other jihadi groups. Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou asserts that dominant social-scientific frameworks used to understand the complex reality of recent upheavals in the Arab world and North Africa, such as 'terrorism' and 'the Arab Uprising', merely serve to 'generate prisms that oscillate between ahistorical and excessively optimistic narratives of overnight rupture...and paternalistic fatalism about the inevitability of conflict in traditional societies'.<sup>19</sup> He also argues that, when such complex events do occur in 'trouble-spots', these frameworks then encourage interventionism as a 'natural' policy to stem 'threats to international peace and security' and legitimate the reordering of 'weak', 'failing', 'fragile' or 'unstable' states and societies.

This chapter has argued that the recent interventions in countries such as Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria should not be seen as something out of the ordinary: the very ordering of the region has long been contingent on such interventions. The uprisings triggered a scramble by regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran and Turkey to shape – whether through transforming or stabilizing – a new order to align with their respective interests. This scramble in turn occurred within the context of a larger international and particularly US order that at first allowed for a certain change within particular national spaces such as Tunisia but then could not countenance larger challenges to the regional political or security architecture. In concrete terms, an initial Turkish- and Qatari-influenced regional state-building project constructed around liberal and 'moderate' Islamist groups was reluctantly accepted by the US on the basis that this transformation would continue to protect wider Western interests in the region. When this project collapsed under the weight of the Saudi interventions and the overt sectarian war that underpinned the Saudi-Iranian geopolitical rivalry for regional influence, a space was opened up for non-state players to gain influence and territory, from Hezbollah and the various al-Qaeda branches in Syria, Libya and Yemen, to the transnational IS and Kurdish separatists. Indeed, in this context one can think of the massive populations of refugees created by these conflicts as one such transnational network.

This transformation, and in particular the huge gains engendered by IS in Iraq and Syria, and by related groups in the Sinai and Libya, as well as their increasing presence in Europe, now became a genuine threat to the US order. In 2013, the US reached an agreement with Iran on the nuclear issue and with Syria on the elimination of the latter's chemical weapons stockpile. It was also now assisting its Kurdish allies in securing their own claimed territories against IS encroachment. By 2015, the US had assembled a coalition, and cooperated with the increasingly

assertive Russia, to degrade IS forces significantly and to work out political deals in Syria that reflected the new status quo. Russia and President Asad was now seen, even if reluctantly, more as partners rather than obstacles to a settlement. It was, perhaps, time for regional stability. This does not mean that the US will successfully impose a particular order in the region: after all, both the 'war on terror' and the state-building projects that formed part of the early Arab uprisings had both failed; while Iran had inadvertently become more powerful. However, it does mean that such interventions, whether successful or not, will continue to be constitutive of the regional order no matter what the local or national aspirations are in the region, from Yemeni rebels and Bahraini and Syrian opposition activists to the various jihadi networks and Kurdish separatists.

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- 12 Koenraad Bogaert, 'Global Dimensions of the Arab Spring and the Potential for Anti-Hegemonic Politics,' Jadaliyya (December 21, 2011), <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3638/global-dimensions-of-the-arab-psring-and-the-potential-for-anti-hegmonic-politics/>.
- 13 Adam Hanieh, op. cit., p.20.
- 14 This 'leading from behind' strategy is elaborated in Manni Crone's chapter in this volume.
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- 16 Rami Zurayk, 'The Arab Uprisings through the Agrarian Lens,' Development Challenges and Solutions After the Arab Spring (ed. Ali Kadri, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 139.
- 17 See Adam Hanieh, op. cit., and Mandy Turner, 'Completing the Circle: Peacebuilding as Colonial Practice in the Occupied Palestinian Territory,' International Peacekeeping, Vol. 19, No. 5 (November 2012).
- 18 For a very useful map that shows the transformation of Palestinian territories into fragments, see the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)'s "Humanitarian Atlas 2015," <http://data.ochaopt.org/humatlas2015/#/6>.
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# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOMESTIC SCENE IN ARAB POLITICS

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By Rasmus Alenius Boserup

## INTRODUCTION

One of the outcomes of 20th-century Arab political history was the creation and consolidation of the modern nation Arab states. Conceived by Arab nationalists in the first part of the 20th century, they became a part of the political reality of the Arab world as the European colonial powers withdrew from the region in mid-century. From their emergence between the 1940s and 1950, many observers were doubtful of their ability to survive. With the exception of a few countries like Egypt and Morocco, the Arab states lacked a clear demarcation between their own and the neighboring countries' cultures, territories, populations and histories, and several early observers saw them as weak or artificial entities imposed on strong and more deeply rooted Islamic or Arab societies.

From the 1980s onwards a new consensus emerged among students of Arab politics that the modern states had been successful in consolidating themselves and that Middle East and Arab politics could not be meaningfully understood without a proper understanding of the state. During the 1990s this interest in understanding the importance of the state paved the way for the production of numerous volumes and textbooks in Middle East studies that analyzed the formation and development of the Arab states. From this tradition, and in response to the hope in the 1990s that a democratization wave would hit the region, scholars developed a further interest in studying the governing mechanisms of the Arab states – the

so-called Arab authoritarianism studies among students of the comparative politics of the Middle East. Certainly the Middle East contained a number of states like Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq (after 2003) were highly perforated by international and regional great powers, and were therefore generally unable to govern their populations and territories effectively. But the dominating picture at the beginning of the 21st century was still one of a region consisting of relatively consolidated and sovereign nation states.

The outbreak of the Arab revolts in 2010 and 2011 provoked a number of events and sequences which suggest that the national domestic scene within each state may no longer be as important as it was in the 20th century and that Arab politics are in consequence increasingly influenced by transnational, international and regional political dynamics. In 2011, for instance, the popular mass mobilization of non-state actors in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and elsewhere suggested that states and regimes had become less able to structure and dominate politics in the region than had previously been assumed. In parallel, already weak states like Iraq and Yemen almost collapsed, while the previously robust and stable states of Syria and Libya almost imploded and gave way to the rise of transnational non-state actors like Islamic State, to regional powers like Iran and to international actors like Russia. By 2016 numerous observers were predicting the collapse of the Arab state system thereby implicitly suggesting that the domestic level of Arab politics had become subordinated to more important regional, transnational and international drivers, factors and actors. While acknowledging that a new conjuncture in Arab politics is emerging in which the capacity of the state and its institutions are being deeply challenged and that the domestic level of politics in a number of Arab states today is more influenced by regional, transnational and international factors, actors and dynamics than it was prior to 2011, this chapter argues that the domestic arenas in the Middle East and North Africa remain of crucial importance for political developments in the region. By tracking the evolution of the multiplicity of conflicts and crises that we observe in the region today back to their domestic origins in 2010 and 2011, and then unfolding the evolution of these domestic conflicts in the direction of the regional and the international levels, the chapter suggests that several key dynamics in Arab politics actually derive from the domestic environment.

## DOMESTIC REVOLUTIONS

When revolutionary protests broke out in several Arab countries in late 2010 and early 2011, they were oriented towards the particular domestic political scene of the nation state in which they were taking place. From Tunisia to Yemen via Egypt, Libya and Bahrain, and on through Syria, Morocco and Iraq, contempt for and dissatisfaction with local, social, economic, generational, geographical and labor market-related conditions crystallized into demands for a change to the domestic framework of politics: the 'system' or 'regime', protesters demanded, had to come to an end.

It is true that from the outset the framing of the revolutionary call for change had a transnational shape: the protesters borrowed heavily from each other across national boundaries, copying each others' slogans. They also borrowed one another's most successful forms of mobilization, from online campaigns on Facebook and Twitter to offline tactics such as taking charge of central squares in metropolises as Tunis, Cairo, Homs and Manama. Behind this uniformity of the repertoire of protest, however, there loomed distinct domestic and local power struggles, structural challenges and opportunities that both new and existing collective actors, movements, networks and institutions responded to and relied on. Hence in Tunisia, the labor unions were among the primary actors. In Egypt, it was the revolutionary socialists in cooperation with the workers' movements who triggered the mobilization, in Libya, it was city-based family and tribal networks, while in Syria protesters were mobilized around spontaneous local networks of activists. The political demands put forwards by these protestors in 2010 and 2011 remained directed specifically against their own domestic political arenas: in Tunisia they demanded the resignation of Ben Ali, in Egypt of Mubarak, in Libya of Gadaffi and in Syria al-Assad. And so on.

Furthermore, most political actors were in 2011 firmly looking inwards, towards their own domestic political scenes. In Egypt, following the fall of Mubarak, for instance, political parties, NGOs, social movements and counter-movements emerged at a riveting pace concurrently with existing and new power centers coming forward to fill the vacuum in the wake of the old regime's temporary collapse. And they all talked about Egypt: Who was allied with whom? Where would the army ultimately position itself? Was the Brotherhood trustworthy? What were to happen to the former NDPs, Mubarak's people etc.?

Similar processes characterized Tunisia in the years immediately following the ouster of Ben Ali, when the transformation process was deeply anchored in local and domestic conditions and processes. And in the states where political leaders were only pushed back after the militarization of the opposition, the main concern of the feuding sides was the various domestic alliance formations: Libyans, for instance, were discussing politics in 2011 as if it was a matter exclusively determined in Libya.

## **DOMESTIC COUNTER-REVOLUTIONS**

The new oppositional movements were also met primarily with domestic counter-measures from the authoritarian regimes during 2011 and afterwards. In the wake of the successful attempts of popular revolts to overthrow heads of states in Tunisia and Egypt in January and February 2011, Arab leaders initiated a protracted counter-attack against their domestic contenders. Rather than walking down the path of power sharing and reform, the Middle Eastern autocrats were intent on obliterating their challengers.

President Assad's regime in Syria has been but the most murderous of these regimes with a key responsibility for the forced displacement of more than half the 25 million Syrian population and the killing of more than 250,000 Syrians in counter-revolutionary actions that have included repeated cases of war crimes, such as barrel bombing, poisonous gas attacks, starvation and systematic torture, rape and maltreatment.

The Syrian regime has not acted alone in this strategy. In Egypt, for instance, the reinstatement of the military at the forefront of political decision-making in the summer of 2013 paved the way for a historical peak in political repression throughout 2014, 2015 and 2016, propelling the numbers of political prisoners from an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 under President Mubarak and his successors in the transition governments to an estimated 60,000 in late 2016, the vast majority of them reportedly belonging to the grassroots organization behind the now outlawed former government party of the Muslim Brotherhood. In one specific, meticulously planned operation in the summer of 2013, Egyptian security forces killed an estimated 900 peaceful protestors in Cairo over a couple of days, an action that in its brutality surpasses what previous Egyptian presidents have carried out and which Human Rights Watch has classified as a 'likely crime against humanity'.



Even in the relatively stable, homogenous and wealthy family-driven states of the Gulf region, since 2011 political repression has reached historical peaks in the wake of the revolts of that year. In Bahrain the regime was already brutally suppressing peaceful protestors in Manama in the early summer of 2011, with assistance from Saudi special operations forces. And in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) a string of police operations have been carried out since 2011 against members of the Muslim Brotherhood's local variant, the Islah Party.

## **DOMESTIC STATE EROSIONS**

The extensive repression enacted by authoritarian Arab regimes has not only crushed the peaceful domestic opposition that emerged in 2011. It has also initiated a broad militarization of contentious politics.

Driven underground or into exile by the police and military, over the past five years many individuals sympathetic to the existing opposition movements within various Arab countries have armed themselves and changed tactics from peaceful mass demonstrations to armed revolts, political assassinations and acts of terrorism.

The militarization of the political opposition has ultimately led to an unprecedented erosion of the states' own repressive capacity and their subsequent ability to maintain a host of key tenets of statecraft – from the monopoly over the exercise of force against the states' own residents to control over order-making on the national territory.

In some countries, such as Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, existing and newly formed militias and jihadist groups have been able to mass-recruit fighters, suicide bombers and civilian sympathizers beyond the traditional core constituencies. Mirroring the extensive repression of the regimes in power, these militarized opposition groups – and especially Islamic State – have adopted and invented violent practices whose brutality goes beyond the more norm-regulated or stringent militant activism earlier seen in most of the region.

It is these protracted and militarized conflicts between the autocratic regimes and their opponents that has gradually eroded the capacities of various Arab states and created a number of local power vacuums. And it is from these increasingly ungoverned spaces that militarized opposition actors have emerged to challenge

not only the regimes, but also the Arab state system itself after decades consolidating of its internationally recognized borders. The expansion of Islamic State across the borders dividing Syria from Iraq is but the most striking illustration of this. Here, the Shia- and Alawi-dominated regimes have retreated into confined territories, respectively southwest Syria and southeast Iraq. As a result, an IS-dominated Sunni enclave has emerged across the shared northern border region and given way to a gradual increase in area by the Kurdish enclaves.

There are other cases that mirror this partial state collapse in Syria and Iraq on a lesser scale. In the young state of Yemen, the power struggles between at least three large, armed coalitions, each controlling parts of the territory, have helped dissolve the central government. The result is a state split between three geographical zones, triggering fears of both an all-out civil war and the ensuing Saudi military intervention.

In Libya, over the past two years two separate coalitions of politicians and armed militias that emerged during the battle against Gadaffi in 2011 have repeatedly threatened the fragile ceasefire brokered by the UN by plunging the country into two separate territorial and administrative entities – an Egyptian-supported east, and a potentially unstable enclave in the west escaping both Egyptian and Algerian control. In 2016 a third, internationally backed government was installed in Tripoli. None of these governments at present seems able to muster sufficient domestic support to govern the totality of the Libyan territory and its population effectively.

In Egypt, for the past two years the military has been fighting a protracted war to regain control over northern Sinai. From his consolidated power base in Cairo, Sisi's push for the peninsula bordering Gaza has in vain sought to quell the armed rebellion launched by a local offshoot of Islamic State that seems capable of perpetuating itself and, as shown by the downing of a Russian civil airliner heading for Moscow in late 2015, expanding its activities.

## **REGIONALIZATION OF DOMESTIC CONFLICTS**

From 2012, the erosion of the capacities of a number of Arab states would significantly facilitate the ability of regional rivals and competitors to intervene and meddle in their respective domestic politics. Hence the regionalization of the

conflicts in the Arab World since 2011 does not signify increased cooperation or integration between the regional great powers and states. Rather, regionalization has primarily played itself out as a process of rivalry and competition.

Several Middle Eastern great powers, who had managed to survive the revolutionary uprisings in 2011 relatively unharmed, scaled up their covert and overt foreign-policy interventions in the region after the summer of 2011. In particular, the rich oil- and gas-exporting countries in the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council, which had by and large been spared the revolts of 2011, were actively competing with their rival Iran in seeking to dominate the collapsing political arenas that emerged out of the domestic conflicts in neighboring Arab states like Syria, Iraq, Egypt and (to a lesser extent) Libya. Likewise, Turkey involved itself head on in the Syrian conflict by trying to sway the power balances in the domestic conflict in favor of Turkey's ally, the Muslim Brotherhood, or at least to hinder Turkey's Kurdish, Shiite and Salafi competitors from acquiring a hegemonic position in the domestic conflict and to prevent the Kurds from grabbing significant chunks of territory.

The ability of these Middle Eastern great and small powers to influence the political outcomes of the domestic conflicts in their neighboring Arab states was further facilitated by the inability of several of the region's traditional great and medium-size powers to project themselves on to the regional level in the wake of the revolutionary uprisings in 2011. Indeed, several of these traditional Middle Eastern great and medium-size powers had themselves become objects of the foreign policies of their regional and international competitors. By 2013, for instance, Syria, which had been a key player in determining the ebbs and flows of Lebanese politics, had become an arena for competing great and small powers, from Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia to small states like Qatar and the UAE. Egypt, which, in spite of its decreasing role in regional politics since the late 1990s, had remained an essential player in handling security and politics in Palestine, had by 2012/2013 itself become an object of financially targeted foreign policies exercised by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE and Qatar. Libya, which under Qaddafi had been the key security provider and financial donor in several Sahel and Sub-Saharan countries, had since 2011 become an object for fierce competition between regional great powers like Algeria, Libya, Qatar and Turkey, as well as between European great powers like Italy and France.

By 2013 the outcome of this process of intensified regional competition had generated a new situation in the Middle East whereby domestic dynamics to a lesser extent than before the revolts of 2011 determined political outcomes. Now several previously relatively autonomous and sovereign Arab political arenas were becoming increasingly responsive to regional and international pressure and influence, thereby adding an additional level of conflict to their domestic power struggles.

Five years after the Arab revolt, the proxy wars and military interventions of Middle Eastern great powers in their neighboring countries have thus become an increasingly important driver of Arab politics and in some cases even a catalyst of domestic power struggles perpetuating and reigniting conflicts in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya.

## **INTERNATIONALIZATION**

Over the past few years since 2011, the Middle East has arguably seen an increase in the importance that international actors play in the regions' conflicts. Somewhat paradoxically, this comes on the back of the apparently decreasing involvement of the West in Middle Eastern regional politics, and by the US in particular since the heydays of US hegemony in the early 2000s. Following a period of the restructuring of US involvement in Middle East regional politics under the former George W. Bush, and more openly admitted under President Obama, the Syrian conflict displayed a renewed tendency towards an alternative type of internationalization in late 2015.

Until late 2015, one particular reading of the US's Middle East policy was that Obama's administration was seeking to find a negotiated solution to the Syrian conflict by coupling it with the attempt to rehabilitate Iran in international politics. During the course of the summer of 2015, the US, Iran and other European powers succeeded in negotiating an agreement regarding increased controls over Iran's nuclear program in exchange for the gradual lifting of international sanctions directed against Tehran.

Besides reducing the risk of American military intervention in Iran by placing rigorous restrictions on Iran's capability to develop nuclear munitions, the agreement also made possible a curbing of the great power struggle in Syria: by rehabilitating Iran in international politics, the deal provided that country with the ability to contribute to

the negotiated exit of President Assad. Conversely the ongoing negotiations with Iran were shielding its protégé, the Assad government, from decisive international action.

In the months following the nuclear agreement between the US and Iran, some slight progress seemed underway in Syria: Iran's President Rouhani demonstrated a conciliatory and cooperative policy line in international politics, and a swirl of rumors suggested that the Iranian Republican Guard was withdrawing its personnel from Yemen, where it had allegedly been fighting against the Saudi-backed government. In the meantime, Iran actively contributed to negotiating a string of ceasefire deals throughout Syria.

Seen through the eyes of the Syrian opposition, the timing for a negotiated solution was optimal, since President Assad's forces seem to have become weaker since the spring of 2015 to such an extent that the President had openly suggested on national television that the Syrian military might be required to surrender parts of Syrian territory to rebel forces (a condition which had existed *de facto* for years).

Thus, another possibility surfaced during the summer of 2015 in which multilateral diplomacy could help contain the destructive power struggle and proxy war, and thereby forge a united approach towards the goal of escorting President Assad out of Syrian politics.

The developments in the fall of 2015 undercut this attempt and renewed the internationalization of the conflict, but on very different terms. Following a formal request by Syria's President Assad, in late September 2015 the Russian Duma approved an urgent submission regarding the legality of conducting military operations in Syria. Hours later, Russian warplanes conducted their first air strikes against rebel positions in northern and eastern Syria.

There is no great surprise in Russia's willingness to prop up and support the Assad regime militarily. Syrian-Russian cooperation dates back decades to the days of Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current president, who came to power by force through a coup d'état as the front figure of the socialist Baath party in 1970. Gradually, as Egypt under President Anwar Sadat turned to the Americans and Western liberalism in the 1970s, the Soviet Union moved its military equipment to the Mediterranean naval base in Tartus, just south of Latakia in Syria. And while Egypt increasingly relied on military assistance from Washington, the Syrian army has until today remained largely dependent on Soviet equipment and expertise.

Since the outbreak of the domestic conflict in Syria, Russia has employed its veto numerous times in the UN Security Council in order to block international military operations against the regime in Syria. It has also maintained active military support to Assad, as shown by the stream of video content uploaded on the Internet by Syrian activists displaying Russian soldiers working shoulder to shoulder with Syrian troops.

Meanwhile, Russia's military build-up in Syria in late 2015 constituted a quantum leap in its support for Assad and a clear increase in the internationalization of the Syrian conflict, with obvious ramifications for the both the domestic and the regional levels of politics.

Domestically it has relieved the Assad regime of the most urgent military pressure that had built up during 2015. Moscow's intervention, which was positioned alongside Assad's strategy, labeled all armed groups in Syria 'terrorists' and focused the bulk of its interventions on other groups than Islamic State – in numerous cases killing members of militias perceived by Western powers as 'moderates', whom in some cases they had armed and equipped.

Regionally this move reduced Iran's incentive to put pressure on Assad, a fact neatly illustrated by Iran's proposal during the peace negotiations in Vienna in November 2015, which mooted the possibility of Assad seeking re-election to the presidency in the future. It has also further triggered the resolve to build up the military both by Assad and by Iran's regional competitors, like Saudi Arabia, the UEA, Kuwait and Turkey.

While the Syrian case offers the most flagrant example of the shift in politics from the domestic to the regional and further to the international level, there are numerous other examples of comparable processes taking place elsewhere in the region over the past few years since. In Libya, the rebel groups have not only systematically competed for regional great power support, but also, and consistently, for US, European and Russian military, financial and diplomatic cooperation. Egypt's shifting governments have combined financial cooperation with the GCC countries with outreach to both European powers and Russia and the US.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOMESTIC SCENE

The past few years have seen the domestic scene of Arab politics come under increasing influence from regional, transnational and international actors and dynamics. In some ways there is little new in this: the Arab world has for centuries been a perforated region with a multiplicity of international and regional actors competing and collaborating with domestic actors over influence over territory, population and resources. Yet the recent conjuncture has seen an apparent erosion of the very structure and actors that were created to control the domestic scene – the strong Arab state and the enduring Arab authoritarian regimes. There is thus a new dynamic at play that legitimately reactivates the question of the relative importance of the domestic level in Arab politics vis-à-vis the other levels of Arab politics.

Yet, as shown in the chronological account above of the evolution of the conflicts that have generated the current challenge to the importance of the domestic level in Arab politics, the drivers behind Arab politics in 2011 were primarily domestic. While the regional rivalry between surviving Middle Eastern great powers like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran may prolong the conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq – possibly for decades – these conflicts are piggybacking on domestic power struggles between actors aspiring to control the state and influence the regime policies. While regional actors may keep these conflicts alive, act as spoilers, boost the abilities of particular proxies and allies and curb the influence of others, they have difficulties operating without domestic actors and in the absence of domestic power struggles. In other words, regional and international actors depend on domestic conflicts to be able to pursue strategies for optimizing their influence and curbing that of their rivals. Domestic actors are not equally restrained by such a dependence on regional and international actors. In 2011 the conflicts emerged independently of the regional level and out of the domestic political settings in each state, where differently constituted and oriented actor groups appropriated the protest repertoire developed in Tunisia and Egypt as a tool for pushing ahead with domestic political agendas. Only after that did the regional, international and transnational levels of conflict emerge.

However, although chronologically the current crisis in the Arab world emerged out of the domestic level and only then spread to the regional and international levels, this does not mean that the other levels are unimportant. On the contrary, any attempt to institutionalize the current conflicts would require targeted efforts addressing all levels: the domestic, the regional and the international. But this does mean that the domestic level remains the key producer of the dynamics of change in Arab politics and that conflict, cooperation, peace, war, reform, repression, progression and regression in contemporary Arab politics all rely intensely on developments in the domestic sphere.

Acknowledging the rising importance of the regional, transnational and international levels in this perspective therefore does not suggest abandoning the decade-long attempts to understand the mechanisms governing domestic politics within each Arab state by using the broad tool box of comparative politics, sociology, anthropology and history. Rather, it suggests that the understanding of Arab politics today requires not only comparative politics, but also a combination of insights into domestic political scenes with a knowledge of the mechanisms governing regional and international relations in the Middle East. In short, understanding the importance of domestic politics in the Arab world today requires a deeper understanding of how the regional and international dimensions are connecting up with each domestic arena more than was the case a few years ago. One result is that the Arab revolts have made it harder and more complex to understand contemporary Arab politics.





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local actors or empowering legitimate ones,  
Western arms transfers fuel wars in  
the most unrestrained manner.

**Western Arms Transfers and Arms Control Policies  
towards the Middle East:**

# **CONSTRAINING REGIONAL ACTORS OR FUELING REGIONAL WARS?**

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**By Coralie Pison Hindawi**

Trade in arms and dual-use technologies is an aspect of commerce that Western states seem eager to control. They do so most obviously out of concern for their own security, as they tend to sell or transfer weapons to their allies, whereas they are unlikely to engage in such trade with enemies or competitors. Increasingly, arms-producing countries have been also claiming to care about the impact that their arms exports may have on the population of the importing country, or on conflicts that the country may be involved in.

The argument that the arms trade is a very particular type of business that ought to be controlled and made to follow certain ethical guidelines is not new. A century ago, the outbreak of World War I was often blamed, in part, on the 'merchants of death,' private arms manufacturers that were deemed responsible for the over-arming of what would become competing belligerents in the global conflict. Later in the century, as the Cold War was ending, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait seemed to trigger another recognition of the dangers of an unchecked arms trade. After a decade of lavish exports to warring Iraq and Iran, the international community appeared to wake up to the 'monster' they had created namely a heavily armed Iraq under the leadership of president Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi crisis sparked on the one hand an unprecedented disarmament process aimed at ridding Iraq of non-conventional weapons and technologies,<sup>1</sup> and, on the other hand a broader process of seeking to achieve a better regulation of the conventional arms trade.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, the unease generated by French Foreign Minister Alliot-Marie when she suggested in early 2011 that France assist the Tunisian President Ben Ali in dealing with dissenting crowds seemed to reflect similar ethical concerns. Such reactions, as well as the efforts to regular the transfer of lethal technologies mentioned above, appear to be based upon a widely shared conviction, in West European countries, that undemocratic governments should not be supported militarily in repressing their populations or attacking their neighbors. Against this background, images of courageous individuals struggling for freedom during the Arab uprisings have certainly increased the scrutiny – by the NGO sector, the media and public opinion in general – of arms transfers from West European governments to non-democratic regimes in the region. The voices calling for a responsible arms trade and for a better control mechanism from the suppliers' end, while not new, have been strengthened by the uprisings.

By contrast, the provision of military assistance to the Libyan rebels fighting against the Gadhafi regime in 2011, and a few years later weapons transfers to Kurdish militias fighting against Islamic State (IS) on Iraqi and Syrian territory, were widely seen in a different light. Military support was presented as a way to empower groups resisting oppression and as an emancipatory tool that would promote the autonomy of legitimate local actors and their ability to defend themselves. While these two different discourses may at first appear to contradict each other, they are actually two sides of what Western states consider more responsible arms transfers and arms control policies that are intended to constrain illegitimate actors and empower legitimate ones from afar.

Appealing though this narrative may sound to Western ears, this chapter questions whether the change in discourse has been accompanied by an actual change in practice. The chapter examines recent Western, and more particularly West European, arms transfers and arms control policies towards the Middle East and asks whether the Arab uprisings have triggered or reinforced changes in these policies. Have Western countries become wary of their policies' impacts and more principled in their choice of partners in the arms trade than they were prior to the Arab uprisings? Have they been able to control the transfers of military technology to the region? To the extent that they have, has this control translated into greater leverage for Western countries in their ability to shape some of the region's developments? And, last but not least, to what extent have arms transfers and control policies actually served legitimate, democratically minded local actors?

These issues will be addressed in three sections of this chapter. First, I offer an overview of the effective elimination of almost all non-conventional weapons from the region. Secondly, I offer an analysis of the growing discourse in favor of a more responsible trade in conventional weapons. For all the focus on so-called 'weapons of mass destruction,' conventional weapons, and more particularly small arms and light weapons, inflict the most casualties each year. Thirdly, the chapter assesses recent trends in conventional arms transfers and control. Overall, the facts reviewed here suggest that not much has changed over the past thirty years. The pervasive temptation for Western arms exporters – their commitment to human rights notwithstanding – to favor economic over ethical concerns remains. Meanwhile, their arms policies have clearly failed to control or contain the region's geopolitical conflicts in a lasting manner.

Rather than controlling illegitimate local actors or empowering legitimate ones, Western arms transfers fuel wars in the most unrestrained manner. Exporting states have limited control over end-users and are unable to prevent the use of weapons against non-violent and democratically minded local agents. The most obvious illustration of the vicious circles nurtured by shortsighted arms transfers to the region is undoubtedly the fact that, according to a recent Amnesty International report, the bulk of the IS arsenal originates from arms that were originally transferred to the Iraqi government.<sup>3</sup> Whether these weapons stem from the massive arms exports of the 1980s, during the Iraq-Iran war, or from the United States military occupation of the country following its 2003 invasion, they have empowered the most violent actors and increased the insecurity of both the initial arms exporters and local civilian populations. Yet, the most tragic irony of the situation is perhaps the fact that IS's military strength is now the primary justification for military interventions, including those by Western countries, in Iraq and Syria, as well as for many arms transfers to the region.

### **TIGHT CONTROL: ELIMINATING NON-CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS FROM THE REGION**

On the face of it, one area in which Western states seem to have been able to control transfers of weapons and technologies most successfully from 1990 onward is that of non-conventional weapons. Over the past two and a half decades, four Middle Eastern countries have had to accept either the complete dismantling of non-conventional programs or drastic monitoring of their activities in those fields.

The first and perhaps most impressive case is that of Iraq. Having secured Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait in the 1991 Gulf War, the UN Security Council chose to regard Iraqi military power as a continuing threat to peace in the Middle East. The Security Council prolonged the use of its Chapter VII powers – the chapter of the UN Charter that allows the Security Council to adopt coercive measures – in order to significantly reduce the continuing threat that it considered Iraq to pose. In early April 1991, more than a month after Iraq's defeat, the Security Council adopted an unprecedented resolution: UN Security Council Resolution 687. This text provided the framework within which, in one of these strange twists of history, the Iraqi non-conventional arsenal that had been built up with massive external support for the previous fifteen years would be systematically destroyed with the support of essentially the same states that had supplied it. One should recall that, among the West European states involved, France and Germany had played a substantial role in building up respectively the Iraqi nuclear and chemical weapons programs. And although the United States played only a minor role in the arming of Iraq during the same period, it provided military assistance from the mid-1980s onward in spite of US awareness of Iraq's repeated use of chemical weapons against both Iran and its own Kurdish population. Following Resolution 687, Iraq was forced to destroy all the non-conventional weapons and long-range ballistic missiles it possessed and completely dismantle related programs. Tragically, the success of this drastic disarmament scheme was never properly acknowledged. Instead, it was used to justify the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, even though Iraq had been effectively disarmed by the mid-1990s.<sup>4</sup>

By some accounts, as a side-effect of the 2003 Iraq invasion, Libya decided to give up its own non-conventional weapons programs. Libya pledged to declare all its nuclear activities to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and to sign the Additional Protocol, an agreement allowing for greater scrutiny over a country's nuclear program. Libya also decided to join the Chemical Weapons Convention and eliminate its chemical weapons program. In addition, it committed itself to eliminating certain categories of long-range ballistic missiles.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the Iraqi and Libyan cases, more recent developments are also remarkable: a major breakthrough disrupted the confrontational pattern within which the so-called 'Iranian nuclear crisis' had been addressed for almost a decade. A genuine process of negotiation between the P5 +1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Germany) and Iran led to the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement, a text, endorsed by the Security Council, that designed a way out of the protracted conflict.

Over the same period, the declared Syrian chemical weapons program was dismantled at an astonishingly rapid pace and in spite of an ongoing civil war. The process began with a Russia-US deal struck in September 2013 in Geneva and the concomitant Syrian accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention. Soon, a mission with members from the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) supervised and verified the destruction of production equipment, stockpiles and production facilities. Within eight months, the declared Syrian chemical weapons material had either been destroyed or removed from the country to be destroyed abroad, and by early 2016 the entirety of the declared chemicals had been successfully destroyed.<sup>6</sup>

On the whole, whereas the proliferation of non-conventional weapons in the Middle East was presented for many years as a major challenge, the picture had dramatically changed before the outbreak of the post-uprisings regional wars and interventions. All the Middle Eastern countries that former US President George W. Bush once listed in his infamous 'Axis of Evil' and US Undersecretary of State John Bolton later added to have either dismantled their programs or, as far as Iran is concerned, accepted unprecedented levels of scrutiny of its nuclear activities for the coming decades. Admittedly, there continue to be worrying programs and activities in the region, most disturbingly Israel's possession of nuclear weapons, but also allegations of further chemical weapons use in Syria, or concerns over the completeness of the Syrian declaration of its chemical weapons program. Also, little progress has been made in organizing a conference to start working on the creation of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East. These limitations notwithstanding, the developments described above point to the feasibility of progressively ridding a region deemed unstable of some of the most destructive weapons. These developments also point to the important role played by external countries in these processes, notably Western countries, which have been particularly eager to control much more tightly the dual-use technologies that had allowed a number of Middle Eastern countries to develop non-conventional weapons or weapons programs to start with.

## **EMPOWERMENT DISCOURSE:**

### **CALLING FOR A MORE ETHICAL CONVENTIONAL ARMS TRADE**

Iraq is commonly credited with triggering the pursuit of more stringent controls on the transfer of conventional arms and dual-use technology. A Middle East Arms Control Initiative was launched by the United States in May 1991, and a series of

meetings designed to establish guidelines for transfers of conventional arms took place among the permanent members of the Security Council. In 1995, the Wassenaar Arrangement formalized a suppliers' club that was seeking to prevent the 'destabilizing accumulation' of conventional arms and dual-use goods and technologies. Then in 1998 the European Union adopted a Code of Conduct on arms exports that became binding ten years later. These efforts arguably culminated in the adoption in 2013 of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), the first international agreement to seek to regulate the transfer of conventional weapons.<sup>7</sup> The ATT entered into force in December 2014.

As with any multilateral treaty negotiated by over a hundred states, the language of the ATT is significantly weaker and the binding obligations of states parties significantly vaguer than most of those who fought for the text had hoped. The treaty does clearly prohibit 'any transfer of conventional arms' by a state party 'if it has knowledge at the time of authorization that the arms or items would be used in the commission of genocide, crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949..., or other war crime.'<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it obliges exporting states to 'assess the potential that the conventional arms or items' would 'contribute to or undermine peace and security', or 'could be used' to 'commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law' or other 'serious violations of international human rights law.'<sup>9</sup> Should the exporting state determine that 'there is an overriding risk' of any of these negative consequences mentioned above, it 'shall not authorize the export.'<sup>10</sup> Given the difficulty of proving any of the above and the fact that enforcement of the treaty obligations is essentially left to states parties with minimal external oversight, the ATT is widely considered to be a weak treaty. However, it reinforces the discourse evoked earlier according to which conventional arms should not be exported when it can be expected that they will be used to commit grave breaches of international human rights and international humanitarian law, or fuel military conflicts.

Within that context, the ferocity with which some Arab regimes repressed dissent during and following the Arab uprisings could not but raise a number of questions regarding the lawfulness and ethics of weapons transfers to these regimes. Consequently, Western states made the argument in the case of Libya that the rebels ought to be armed and militarily supported in their fight against the Gadhafi regime. Later, as IS emerged, Germany and other West European countries also sent weapons to support Kurdish armed groups in their resistance to IS. An optimistic interpretation of these developments would suggest that, two decades after the



invasion of Kuwait and the collective mea culpa that ensued over the arming of Iraq, the Arab uprisings encouraged major Western, notably West European, arms exporters to reflect once again on the impact of their weapons transfers. According to this optimistic interpretation, recent transfers of arms to groups resisting oppressive forces could be seen as proof that the practices of Western arms exporters have evolved and become more ethically driven.

### **REALITY CHECK:**

#### **RECENT TRENDS IN WESTERN ARMS TRANSFERS TO THE REGION**

The problem with this particular narrative of a 'more ethical' arms trade is that it does not pass the reality check. William Hartung had already warned us of this, highlighting as early as 1992 the 'glaring contradiction between the growing rhetoric of arms transfer restraint and the reality of business as usual in the arms trade' and noting that, 'during a year of talking about stemming the arms trade, the Bush administration concluded deals for the sale of more than \$15 billion in U.S. arms to the Middle East alone.'<sup>11</sup> A very similar argument could be made today. Recent trends in Western arms transfers to the Middle East suggest that neither the invasion of Kuwait nor the Arab uprisings have led to more 'ethically driven arms transfers' to the region.

One will struggle to find evidence of ethical concerns when it comes to massive arms transfers to Saudi Arabia, a country with an appalling human rights record. The kingdom not only came to the rescue of the Bahraini regime in suppressing popular calls for democracy in 2011, it has also been leading a coalition engaged in a very violent war in Yemen since March 2015. Credible allegations of Saudi Arabia engaging in human rights violations and war crimes in Yemen do not seem, as yet, to have significantly affected the most prominent Western weapons exporters. Although in February 2016 the European Parliament voted in favor of an EU-wide arms export embargo on Saudi Arabia, so far the Netherlands has been the only country to have implemented this non-binding measure. According to figures issued by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Saudi Arabia tripled the amount of its arms imports between 2010 and 2016 and is now ranked as the second largest weapons importer worldwide. Over 90% of the exports to Saudi Arabia that took place between 2011 and 2015 originated from Western countries. The United States was the largest provider (exporting almost half of the arms transferred during that period), followed by the United Kingdom, Spain and

France as major providers. According to publicly available figures, the total reported value of licenses and announced sales to Saudi Arabia by states that were either parties or signatories to the Arms Trade Treaty reached more than USD 25 billion in 2015 alone.<sup>12</sup>

As for the second largest weapons importer in the region and the fourth largest importer worldwide, the United Arab Emirates purchases its equipment predominantly from the United States, but also from a number of West European countries. France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands were among its providers in 2015. France also signed export contracts with Egypt in 2015 amounting to over 5 billion euros, a huge deal that promoted France instantly to Egypt's number one weapons supplier with seemingly little concern over the coup that had violently overthrown democratically elected President Morsi in 2013. The second largest supplier in 2015 was still the United States, with Spain, Russia, Germany and Canada as additional providers. Also, Egypt maintained its position as the second largest recipient of US military aid in the region, with funding reaching 1.3 billion US dollars per year for most of the 2009-2015 period.<sup>13</sup>

Though Israel is a more prominent weapons exporter than importer, it continues to be a major military partner of Western countries, particularly the United States. Transfers from Germany and Italy have increased in recent years in spite of repeated Israeli violations of international humanitarian law, notably during the 2009 and 2014 attacks on Gaza. Together with the United States, these three countries appear to be the primary providers of weapons to Israel.<sup>14</sup> However, such figures do not tell the entire story. A close study of British arms exports reveals that in 2014 new arms deals had been approved by the UK a few weeks after Israel's Operation Protective Edge that cost over two thousand lives, the vast majority of them Palestinian civilians. Additionally, the UK continues to sell components to destinations such as Germany, Italy or the United States for incorporation into weaponry that is then sold to Israel. Most significantly, Israel has been receiving the highest amount of US military assistance worldwide, oscillating between USD 2.5 and 3 billion per year since 2009. In September 2016, the US itself committed to a USD 38 billion package of military aid for Israel for the post-2018 decade.<sup>15</sup>

Last but not least, the picture of post-2003 arms transfers to Iraq is largely one of a country that, having been heavily armed during the 1980s and aggressively disarmed during the 1990s, is now back in the market as an acceptable partner and a potential buyer of weapons. Iraq's return to the market has not raised major

concerns in Western capitals, in spite of the increasing scrutiny of conventional arms transfers, best signified by the 2013 adoption of the Arms Trade Treaty. As of 2016, Iraq had not recovered its position as the leading importer of military goods in the Middle East, a highly competitive region in this category, given Saudi Arabia's and the United Arab Emirates' rankings as the second and fourth largest arms importers worldwide. Nonetheless, after its complete disappearance from the arms transfers market between 1991 and 2003, Iraq has undoubtedly reaffirmed itself as a major arms recipient since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. While the value of these imports has fluctuated over the years, overall Iraq has turned into a major recipient of small arms and light weapons since the 2003 invasion, and transfers were significantly boosted by the emergence of IS in 2014, doubling within a year. The United States continues to be Iraq's primary supplier, though Russian imports have increased exponentially over the past two years. Apart from concluding one deal in 2010, and despite substantial efforts to secure more, France has so far not managed to reenter an Iraqi arms market that is significantly less diverse than it was during the 1980s. Should the trend of the past two years continue, however, the number and value of transfers from major suppliers may continue to increase, along with the number of less prominent supplier states.<sup>16</sup>

### **WEAPONS IN THE 'WRONG HANDS': A GLOOMY ASSESSMENT OF WESTERN ARMS TRANSFERS AND ARMS CONTROL POLICIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Western, and notably West European, arms transfers and arms control policies towards Middle Eastern countries tell a multifaceted tale. On the surface, it seems to be a tale of intervention and control, allegedly for the best of the peoples – or at least the peace-loving individuals – living in the region. With the notable exception of Israel and the persistence of chemical weapons use in Syria, non-conventional weapons have been successfully dismantled and activities closely monitored in four different countries over the past two decades. Western arms-producing countries claim to be increasingly wary of the impact of their conventional weapons exports and eager to exercise as much control as possible to prevent military equipment from falling into the 'wrong hands' and breaching international human rights or humanitarian law. Whereas Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Gadhafi's Libya and Assad's Syria were rid of their non-conventional weapons and programs, after 2010 conventional weapons were exported to Libyan rebels and Kurdish militias to support them in their fight against an aggressive ruler in the former case, and a bloodthirsty non-state armed group in the latter.

But many policies are difficult to reconcile with the responsible control narrative, such as the active rearmament of Iraq post-2003. The massive armament of Saudi Arabia has been going on for decades and only increased with the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen. Adding to them numerous other arms deals in the region, these policies significantly weaken the idea that the transfer of military goods and technology by Western countries has become more ethical as a result of the 1980s' 'mistakes' or following the Arab uprisings. For all the talk over the Arms Trade Treaty, decisions to transfer or control arms seem to continue to be primarily determined by economic and strategic calculations rather than moral concerns or 'responsible' politics. But what do arms-exporting or arms-controlling countries actually control when they transfer weapons, or, alternatively, when they refuse to transfer arms or exert pressure on other countries to rid themselves of specific weapons?

The Iraqi case is an instructive, if sad, illustration. Arms were massively transferred as long as Saddam Hussein was deemed an ally, then suddenly withheld when he became the world's number one threat to international peace and security, whereas post-Saddam Hussein's Iraq has again been a major recipient of Western military material. Aside from the obvious economic incentives, the successive shifts in arms transfers and control policies towards Iraq seem to be largely guided by attempts to use weapons transfers or controls as a way to weaken or strengthen actors or, more broadly, as a way to influence events in the Middle East.

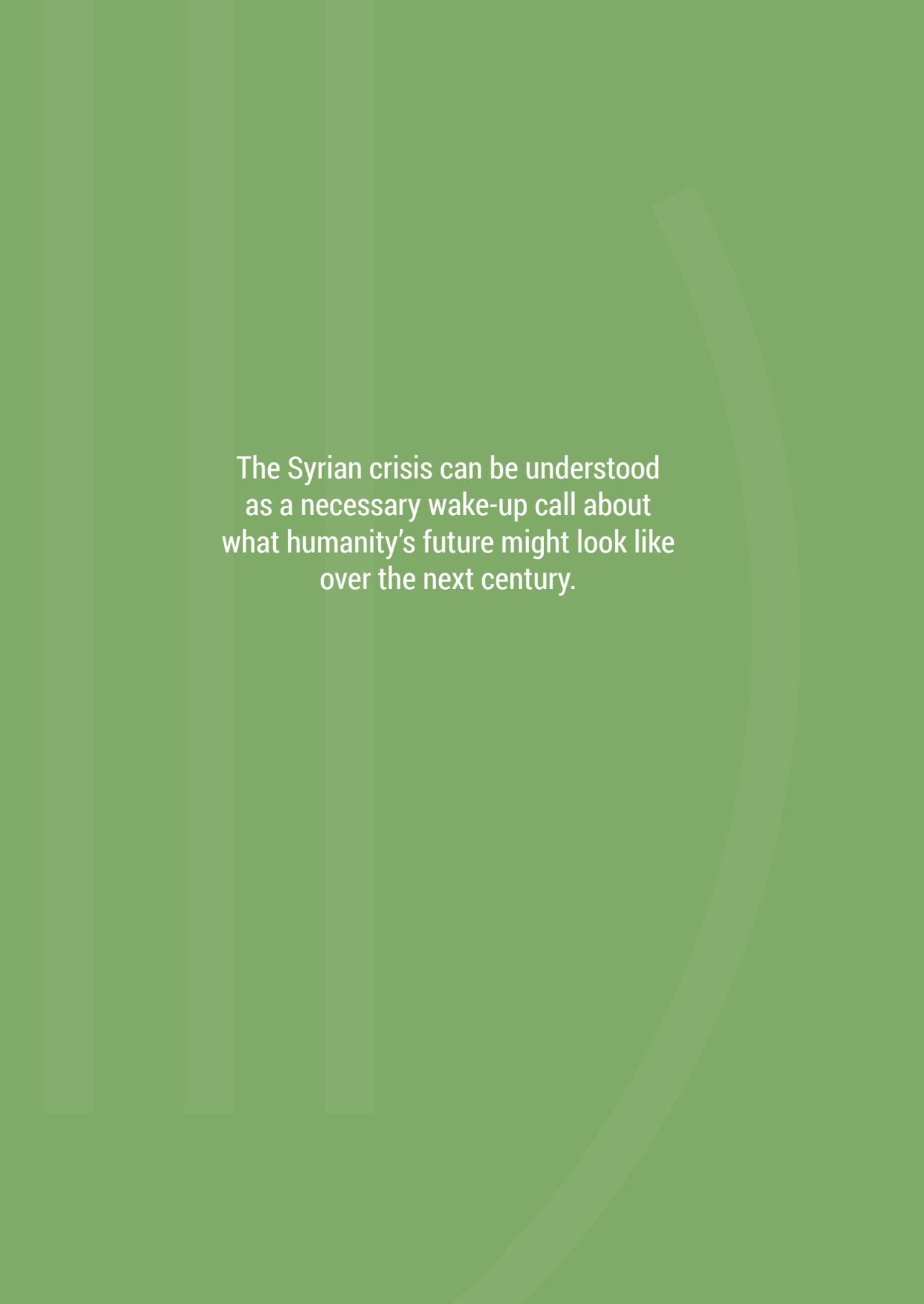
Arms transfers to Iraq and Iran in the 1980s, according to most accounts, were both a lucrative business and a means to prevent an Iranian victory while weakening both Iran and Iraq. However, while the transfers certainly contributed to the achievement of these goals, they also significantly increased the Iraqi regime's military power, as well as its ability to coerce its neighbors. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 demonstrated that supplying weapons to an actor does not necessarily provide leverage over its policies. The control of arms during the 1990s certainly proved more successful in drastically reducing the autonomy and policy options of the Iraqi government. But then again, the coercive dismantling of the Iraqi non-conventional weapons programs came with a heavy price in humanitarian terms. It also, in complex ways, paved the way for the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, whether we think that the invading countries went to war based upon the belief that Iraq continued to pose a threat because of the weapons it possessed, or whether we believe that the invasion was possible precisely because the process had successfully rid Iraq of the means to defend itself.

Even if one adopts a more cynical approach focused on Western strategic interests in the region, rather than ethical concerns about the well-being of local populations, current regional developments seem to contradict the notion that the aggressive disarmament of Iraq followed by its invasion actually led to an outcome that enhances US or Western leverage in the region. The fact that the group that is now widely considered by many Western states to be the most pressing threat (IS) inherited most of its arsenal from the weapons exported to Iraq over the past three decades shows that weapons transfers may very well strengthen the very actors the suppliers insist they are dedicated to fighting. A December 2015 report by Amnesty International found 'that there is a close match between the types of weapons currently being used by IS and the inventory of the Iraqi military, built up over the past five decades.'<sup>17</sup> The report concludes that 'the bulk of the arms and ammunition currently in the possession of IS has been seized from or has leaked out of Iraqi military stocks.'<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the military power of IS is used today to justify external military involvement and arms exports to the region.

Taken together with the support of so-called 'mujahedeen' fighters in Afghanistan during the 1980s, who then turned into members of Al Qa'ida, a brief overview of recent Western arms transfers and arms control policies towards the Middle East reminds us how limited the control over weapons recipients is bound to be. Attempting to control local actors or outcomes through the provision of weapons is a perilous enterprise. The Iraqi case in particular is a stark reminder of the fact that local agents will be empowered by the weapons exported, whether they were the intended recipients or not. Far from allowing the US to 'lead from behind' with a 'light footprint,' the only thing that arms transfers guarantee is that the 'turbulent' processes and new forms of military warfare noted by Hazbun and others in this book will be more violent. The footprint left by recent Western arms transfers and arms control policies in the Middle Eastern region is in no way light: it is disproportionately large, and it is bloody.

- 1 By non-conventional weapons is meant biological, chemical and nuclear weapons, widely known as weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Although this categorization has been criticized for suggesting, erroneously, that biological and chemical weapons can be compared to nuclear weapons in terms of their destructive power, we shall use it for purposes of convenience. It should be noted that long-range missiles are commonly associated with non-conventional weapons, as they are their most frequent means of delivery.
- 2 Conventional weapons, by contrast, refer by default to other types of weaponry that are not listed as non-conventional. Conventional weapons include small arms and light weapons, but also major war equipment such as battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, large-caliber artillery systems, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, missiles and missile launchers, as well as ammunition.
- 3 Amnesty International, *Taking Stock: The Arming of Islamic State*, ME/2812/2015 (December 7, 2015), available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/2812/2015/en/>.
- 4 Coralie Pison Hindawi, 'The Controversial Impact of WMD Coercive Arms Control on International Peace and Security: Lesson from the Iraqi and Iranian Cases,' *Journal for Conflict and Security Law*, 16:3 (2011): 417-442.
- 5 Gawdat Bahgat, *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007).
- 6 Karim Makdisi and Coralie Pison Hindawi, *Creative Diplomacy amidst a Brutal Conflict: Analyzing the OPCW-UN Joint Mission for the Elimination of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Program*, Research Report (Beirut: Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, September 2016).
- 7 Edward Lurance, '1991 Arms Trade Control Efforts and their Echoes,' *Arms Control Today*, July 2011.
- 8 United Nations, *The Arms Trade Treaty*, Article 6, available at <https://unoda-web.s3-accelerate.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/English7.pdf>.
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- 10 United Nations, *The Arms Trade Treaty*, Article 7.
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The background is a solid green color. It features several vertical stripes of varying shades of green, creating a textured effect. A large, thick, light green curved line starts from the top right and sweeps downwards towards the bottom left, framing the text on the right side.

The Syrian crisis can be understood  
as a necessary wake-up call about  
what humanity's future might look like  
over the next century.



## Environmental Crisis and the Syrian War

# REGIONAL INSTABILITY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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By Alexander D. Barder

The essays in this volume explore various aspects of a region in crisis. Attention is naturally drawn to the Syrian civil war, which has been raging since 2011 and has so far claimed the lives of over 400,000 individuals according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. While the war's causes have been hotly debated – explanations ranging from demographic changes in Syria, to economic stagnation, political dissidence, regional geopolitics etc. – an additional element that is increasingly being taken into account is climate change and its effects. As we know, climate change transcends political, economic, social and cultural boundaries that we take for granted. Environmental changes associated with climate change will initially have a disproportionate effect upon populations in the global South. Such effects will increasingly expose fragile material infrastructures, highlight the precariousness of food supplies and call into question the power and capacities of the state. An early sign of how climate change can have drastic political, economic and social effects is the case of Syria. The Syrian case is interesting for two important reasons. First, the crisis took place within a larger set of political revolts commonly referred to in the Western media as the 'Arab Spring,' but more broadly referred to as the Arab Uprisings. While uprisings reflect a variety of causes, climate change may act as a 'stressor' in that it can trigger the conditions of rebellion.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, and more specifically regarding Syria, the persistence of drought conditions has led to increased migration from rural to urban areas that has exacerbated social and class tensions. Syria, I argue in this essay, is in a sense the proverbial 'canary in the coal mine', giving us a necessary wake-up call about what humanity's future may look like over the next century.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change forecasts an average rise of 1 to 3 degrees Celsius in temperatures over the next century. Though such a rise in temperatures appears small, its effects will be profound. The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) argues that it will have important implications for agricultural production. It will also lead to a rise in sea level by 1 to 4 feet by 2100. One result of this will be, for example, that the eastern seaboard of the United States will be flooded increasingly frequently, while Arctic areas will be largely free of ice. In addition, and most importantly, there will be lengthy heat waves and droughts across the planet.<sup>2</sup>

While measuring the environmental effects of climate change is an ongoing process – one that is necessarily inter-generational – we are already witnessing the political, economic and social effects of changing environmental conditions. There is increasing evidence that climate change is having a ‘catalytic effect’ on an increasing number of civil wars and conflicts in the global South, of which Syria is a prime example. In particular, the proliferation of drought conditions, as many increasingly recognize, will have politically destabilizing effects in areas where agriculture remains the dominant form of rural livelihood. This destabilization of the global South will inevitably have important geopolitical consequences: for example, increasing resource conflicts may lead to the failure of various domestic institutions to distribute adequate goods and services to the population. Such conflicts will create the conditions for civil wars, heighten geopolitical tensions, increase mass migrations and may lead, as Timothy Snyder has recently argued, to new forms of genocide and imperialism. ‘Climate change,’ Snyder avers, ‘has also brought uncertainties about the food supply back to the center of great power politics.’<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I examine more specifically the relationship between climate change and political crisis in the context of the Syrian civil war. I argue that scholars and policy-makers need to take climate change into account as a key ‘actant’ – or non-human actor – in international politics in order to anticipate the potential conditions for civil strife to emerge.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that climate change is or should be defined as the unique or fundamental causal variable in the emergence of the Syrian civil war. It is rather that significant changes in the rural environment throughout the Levant have had a series of cascading effects that helped unleash the events that began in Daa’ra in March 2011. In other words, understanding the ways in which climate change impacts on and intersects with political, social and economic process will give policy-makers a greater awareness of the risks of catastrophic conflict occurring in vulnerable societies. Taking into account climate change as an element in a constellation of causes has policy implications: policy-makers

will increasingly need to address issues ranging from food insecurity to grazing, irrigation and the allocation of water resources as they negotiate geopolitical pressures. In particular, this has important implications for post-war reconstruction efforts: if the Syrian state does not address the prevalent insecurities exposed by climate change, then the inevitable outcome will be renewed conflict.

## **CLIMATE AND CONFLICT**

Conceptually the problem remains that of linking environmental history with political history. It is only recently that a variety of scholars have started drawing such connections. Historians, for example, are rethinking the catalysts of great conflicts beyond just human actions. Geoffrey Parker argues that examining climactic changes may reveal a common pattern of violence that occurred across the globe in the seventeenth century. Parker shows how political, economic and social upheavals across the planet were tied to a general cooling of the climate – what is often referred to as the ‘Little Ice Age’: ‘The fatal synergy that developed between natural and human factors created demographic, social, economic and political catastrophe that lasted for two generations.’<sup>15</sup> The effects of these climactic changes were catastrophic. As one can imagine, societies that were reliant upon precarious agricultural production and distribution were thrown into civil conflict as famine increasingly took hold. But the important point here is that the work of environmental and social historians provides a new lens for understanding periods of acute political crisis. Analytically, the question remains of how to factor in such environmental actants or effects into causal accounts of political crises. This is a key necessity if a broader policy for addressing potentially catastrophic events is to be developed.

Climate scientists Solomon Hsiang, Marshall Burke and Edward Miguel have attempted to establish a causal relationship of this sort between climactic change and political conflict. In an essay in the magazine *Science*, they write, ‘large deviations from normal precipitation and mild temperatures systematically increase the risk of many types of conflict, often substantially, and ... this relationship appears to hold over a variety of temporal and spatial scales.’<sup>16</sup> They define three ‘plausible mechanisms’ at work in terms of the relationship between climate change and conflict. First, the detrimental consequences of climate change are initially felt in terms of a decline in economic activity and productivity, which increasingly weakens the state and its institutions. As economic activity declines, the motivation to engage in forms of political dissidence spreads, creating a positive feedback loop

of dissidence and weakening state authority. In Syria, drought conditions had a substantial impact on the agricultural sector, which accounted for about 20% of economic activity.<sup>7</sup> Second, the authors point to increases in inequality resulting from climate change as a motivation for political crisis. Continued food insecurity as a result of drought, for example, intensifies class inequalities and creates demands for economic redistribution. Indeed, this also contributes to the weakening of the state because of its inability to manage socio-economic cleavages. Lastly, another mechanism that could induce political crisis is the acceleration of rural migration and urbanization. Rapid urbanization 'might lead to conflicts over geographically stationary resources that are unrelated to the climate but become relatively scarce where populations concentrate.'<sup>8</sup> This last point is important for understanding the specific trajectory that led to the Syrian crisis. The changing rural landscape in drought zones precipitated the mass movement of people into urban zones that the Syrian state was increasingly unable to manage effectively. Typically, this mass rural migration induces a set of economic or class tensions that become increasingly volatile. To be sure, what added to the volatility of the Syrian case was an already unstable geopolitical context: the movement of Iraqi refugees fleeing the abutting civil war in Iraq during the American occupation created an assemblage of conditions that set the stage for explosive political rebellion.

## **CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR**

Beginning in 2006 throughout the Levant, a precipitous drought began to take hold. NASA's twin satellites called GRACE (Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment) began noticing that the water levels of the Tigris-Euphrates basin 'comprising Turkey, Syria, Iraq and western Iran – is losing water faster than any other place in the world except northern India.'<sup>9</sup> This led, on the one hand, to geopolitical tensions between states in the region, since Turkey's infrastructure projects have for some time been diverting water resources for their own use. On the other hand, the crisis in Iraq that emerged out of the American occupation severely affected the capacity of Iraqi state institutions to manage this emerging water crisis. As Joshua Hammer writes, 'In Iraq, the absence of a strong government since 2003, drought and shrinking aquifers have led to a recent spate of assassinations of irrigation department officials and clashes between rural clans.'<sup>10</sup> The condition of lawlessness (especially in northern Iraq), the sectarian civil war and the complete paralysis of state governance up until the present precipitated an influx of refugees throughout the Levant and into Syria.

This drought affected Syria in significant ways as well. Even though the Syrian state was more effective in projecting its authority, direct mismanagement of water resources proved to be deeply destabilizing. As Gary Nabhan writes, the Syrian drought was the ‘worst long-term drought and most severe set of crop failures since agricultural civilizations began in the Fertile Crescent many millennia ago.’<sup>11</sup> Peter Gleick develops this further in his essay ‘Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria’:

Between 2006 and 2009, around 1.3 million inhabitants of eastern Syria were affected by agricultural failures. An estimated 800,000 people lost their livelihoods and basic food supports. During this period, yields of wheat and barley dropped 47% and 67%, respectively, and livestock populations plummeted. A return of drought in 2011 worsened the situation. By late 2011, the UN estimated that between two million and three million people were affected, with a million driven into food insecurity. More than 1.5 million people – mostly agricultural workers and family farmers – moved from rural land to cities and camps on the outskirts of Syria’s major cities of Aleppo, Damascus, Dara’a, Deir ez-Zour, Hama, and Homs.<sup>12</sup>

The drought eviscerated the livestock of many farmers; feed prices significantly increased, and many farmers were forced to sell some of their livestock in order to meet debt payments. Gleick draws our attention to the fact that poor management, archaic forms of irrigation and political decisions designed to benefit certain groups over others exacerbated the water crisis. Eighty percent of irrigation in Syria is by traditional flooding, a highly inefficient use of water when compared to sprinklers or drips.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the drought created a significant migration of households into urban environments:

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The drought also forced 250,000-300,000 families (at least 1.25-1.5 million people) to leave their villages and they are now concentrated in the suburbs of Damascus and other cities like Aleppo and Daa’ra, according to Mohamad Alloush, director of the environment department at the State Planning Commission (SPC).<sup>14</sup> ‘There was nothing left for these people in their villages and they are living now in very poor conditions,’ he said.<sup>15</sup>

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Suzanne Saleeby argues further that the water crisis was significantly aggravated by political and economic decisions: 'the regime's failure to put in place economic measures to alleviate the effects of drought was a critical driver in propelling such massive mobilizations of dissent.'<sup>16</sup> As she continues:

” Over the past decade, Bashar al-Assad has attempted to propel Syria along the Chinese path of development, in which political stability through one-party rule is relentlessly maintained while modernization through market-based reform is pursued. This was reflected in the June 2005 Baath Party Congress' announcement that Syria would adopt a 'Socialist Market Economy.' This change took place alongside soaring global grain prices, increasing food imports and declining oil outputs amidst rising Syrian demand for fuel. Unsurprisingly, unemployment soared to between twenty and twenty-five percent by 2008... It is logical to conclude that escalating pressures on urban areas due to internal migration, increasing food insecurity, and resultant high rates of unemployment have spurred many Syrians to make their political grievances publically known.<sup>17</sup> ”

These market-based reforms precipitated socio-economic insecurities that accelerated the mass movement of people to Syrian cities. Saleeby's point here is important: the move towards 2011 and the uprising in Daa'ra that led to the Syrian uprising cannot be reduced to one overall factor; rather, it happened within a wider material-political context in which climate change added to various systemic stresses. In their edited volume *The Arab Spring and Climate Change*, Caitlin Werrell and Francesco Femia deploy the term 'stressor' for phenomena that 'can ignite a volatile mix of underlying causes that erupt into revolution.'<sup>18</sup> This does not mean, however, that climate change should be considered the causal variable in determining why particular events occur. For example, Rami Zurayk and Anne Gough argue that the Syrian case should primarily be understood in the neoliberal context of diminishing food subsidies and 'cheap imports' that devastated the agricultural sector prior to the uprising.<sup>19</sup> However, by emphasizing climate change here, the claim is not to focus on one element or the other; it is rather a way of describing how a complex conjunction or network of variables that may intensify and amplify political changes. Climate change should increasingly be seen as a catalytic event embedded within human-centric actions that can precipitate political crises.

## **OUR SYRIAN FUTURE: CLIMATE CHANGE AS THE 21ST CENTURY SECURITY ISSUE**

Uncovering the linkages between climate change and the Syrian civil war is important not only to contextualize these diverse processes and show how they are linked with one another; it is also important because the intensification of global climate change will necessarily create similar situations in other parts of the world. The crises in the Middle East and North Africa, and the intensification of political instability in Syria in particular, need to be understood as part of a larger context of evolving climate change and its effects on human societies. Moments of acute drought are especially important in understanding how 'preexisting social institutions may strain beyond recovery and lead to major changes in governing institutions.'<sup>20</sup> This implies the increasing importance of resilient critical infrastructure to maintain political and economic institutions overall. Even the global North will not be immune: rising temperatures and sea-levels will increasingly strain these states' capacities to govern effectively as well. Nonetheless, with the acceleration of climatic change occurring over the next century, we can anticipate the progressive breakdown of state institutions across the planet and the persistence of political instability.

This is a scenario that the US military is increasingly concerned with. Climate change represents a fundamental challenge to the national security paradigm of the twentieth century. That paradigm primarily focused on state and non-state actors (i.e. human-centric agents) as the potential threats. However, with climate change, security issues are necessarily broadened to take into account environmental effects on human institutions. Environmental changes that result in complete or partial state failure, as is the case in Syria, could have substantial repercussions. One is the proliferation of ungoverned spaces where armed factions operate without being able to assert central political control (i.e. the emergence of groups like Islamic State (IS)). This devolution of state capabilities and persistent insecurity can also result in mass migrations as refugees increasingly flee conflict zones. This is obviously the case in Syria over the course of 2014 and 2015, but we are evidently now seeing the proliferation of migration across the Middle East region. Furthermore, while climate change can have devastating effects throughout the global, South it may also accelerate great power conflicts. Asked what could be the worse-case scenario under rampant climate change, retired Rear Admiral David Titley replied that it could precipitate great power rivalries throughout the twenty-first century.<sup>21</sup> The Syrian conflict has exposed global geopolitical fault lines between the United States and its Gulf allies on the one hand and the Russian Federation on the other.

Taking climate change into account has certain conceptual and practical implications. First, we should be much more attuned to the effects that material objects have upon human actions. As the philosopher Levi Bryant argues, we should place 'increased attention [on] regimes of attraction and problems of resonance between objects.'<sup>22</sup> In other words, we need to focus less on content analysis and in assuming the primacy of human agents and more on the ways in which objects or, what Bruno Latour calls actants or non-human agents, have effects that percolate widely across systems. Non-human agents have the capacity to act not because such objects possess intentions, but rather because they always leave traces or have effects in the world that create new forms of relationship. In practice, taking climate change into account also implies that concepts such as regional autonomy will increasingly be seen as problematic. Global climatic change will necessarily have specific regional effects, but they are effects that will increasingly be felt globally. The effects of the Syrian crisis cannot be confined to the Middle East. The Syrian crisis and its – consequences, such as mass migrations, increased terrorism, geopolitical destabilization, and ethnic or religious strife, extends beyond politically defined borders.

These effects have implications for policy-makers. First, policy-makers need to develop frameworks for addressing a wider concatenation of events that create conditions of crisis. Rising food prices and population growth may not in themselves cause political instability, but in conjunction with severe drought and geopolitical tensions, they increase the risk of substantial catastrophic events. Secondly, policy-makers need to shift from reactive policies to proactive ones designed to increase the resilience of critical infrastructure. Rather than seeing the potential consequences of climate change mainly in terms of security or military responses, transnational institutions need to be much more robust in taking prophylactic measures. Thirdly, and specifically with respect to Syria, post-war reconstruction efforts will also need to take climate change into account. This means specifically focusing on economic development through robust, sustainable and equitable means, for example, modernizing agricultural irrigation to conserve water, reversing neoliberal programs that result in price volatility and ensuring food security. Climate change will necessarily redefine the world in which we live. In a sense, we need to become much more attuned to how environmental changes do not really pay heed to our human-centric world. Climate change will renew our awareness of our intimate vulnerability as a species.



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- 2 NASA, 'The consequences of climate change,' available at <http://climate.nasa.gov/effects/>.
- 3 Timothy Snyder, 'The Next Genocide,' *New York Times* September 13, 2015, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/13/opinion/sunday/the-next-genocide.html>.
- 4 The term 'actant' is taken from Bruno Latour's work in Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Latour defines an actant as 'any entity that modifies another entity....' Key is the idea of modification, which does not imply an idea of intentionality. Thus non-human actants become actors in so far as they modify assemblages of relations, thereby giving rise to something novel in the world. Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- 5 As Parker continues, 'Many parts of sub-Saharan Africa suffered a serious drought between 1614 and 1619; Japan experienced its coldest spring of the seventeenth century in 1616; heavy snow fell in subtropical Fujian in 1618; the winter of 1620-1 was intensely cold in Europe and the Middle East; drought afflicted both the valley of Mexico and Virginia for five years out of six between 1616 and 1621. Finally, 1617 and 1618 marked the beginning of a prolonged aberration in the behavior of the sun, signaled first by the reduction and then by the virtual disappearance of sunspots.' Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).
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- 17 Saleeby, 'Sowing the Seeds of Dissent,' (emphasis added).
- 18 Werrell and Femia, *The Arab Spring and Climate Change*, p. 1.
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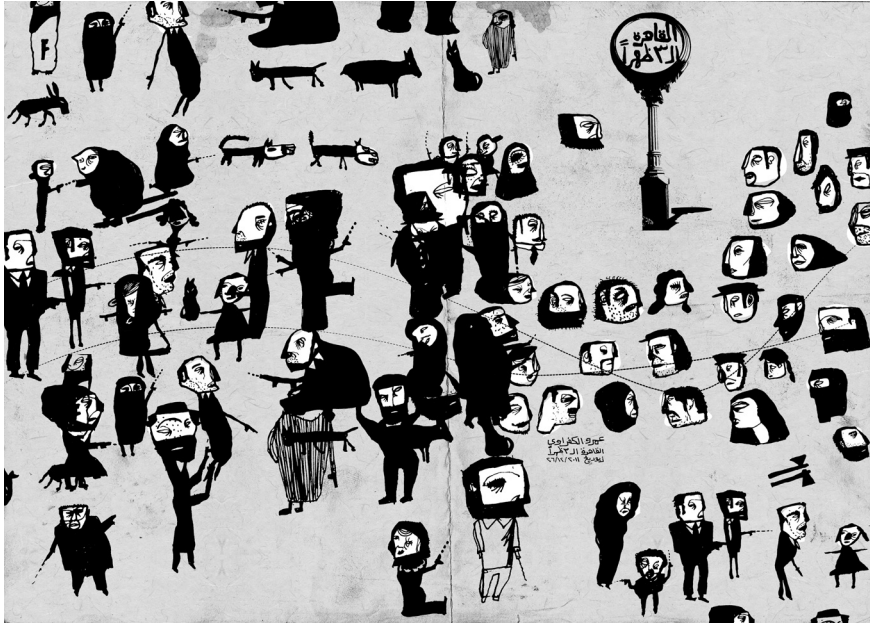
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### **Defence and Security Studies at DIIS**

This publication is part of the Defence and Security Studies at DIIS. The aim of these studies is to provide multidisciplinary in-depth knowledge on topics that are central for Danish defence and security policy, both current and in the long term. The design and the conclusions of the research under the Defence and Security Studies is entirely independent. Conclusions do not reflect the views of the ministries or any other government agency involved, nor do they constitute an official DIIS position. Additional information about DIIS and our Defence and Security Studies can be found at [www.diis.dk](http://www.diis.dk)

Six years after the Arab Uprisings the Middle East domestic and regional political order is in flux. States have collapsed. Regional great powers have seen themselves sidelined by small- and mid-size powers. And this former region of great US strategic interest is increasingly under the influence of an emerging Russia. This edited volume brings together a number of scholars and experts from the American University of Beirut and the Danish Institute for International Studies to discuss the present and future of the region. Touching upon a host of topics, ranging from security infrastructure, arms exports and environmental crises through regional competition, domestic politics and foreign military interventions, the book provides a broad picture of a region in turmoil. Taken together the essays suggest that the Middle East and North Africa is likely to remain trapped in protracted violence for decades to come.

