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The Middle East's Spreading Morass

AUGUSTUS RICHARD NORTON

There are myriad explanations for the tumult that grips today's Middle East. One might begin with the boundaries drawn largely by France and Britain following World War I, or the subsequent impact of the Cold War struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. The weak institutions and rapaciously corrupt regimes that came with the emergence of many new states following World War II are also part of the story. The quest of vast multitudes of demonstrators in recent years for dignity, jobs, and an end to corruption certainly lends emphasis to poor governance as a potent driver of dissent. Equally important, the US-British decision to invade Iraq and topple the regime led by Saddam Hussein fomented a shift in the regional balance of power between Iran and the key Arab states of the region, not least Saudi Arabia.

In this essay, I do not offer a definitive explanation of the causes of the current turmoil, but I do insist that focusing only on the behavior of regional actors leaves too much out of the picture. Moreover, while states are often crucial players, non-state groups may be quite as potent, as demonstrated dramatically by the self-described Islamic State (ISIS), which seized Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, in 2014 and now controls large expanses of Iraq, as well as a sizable chunk of Syria.

It seems a simple matter to identify the geopolitical contestants in the conflicts roiling the Middle East as Iran (and its allies) versus Saudi Arabia (and its allies). But the reality is that the cast of contestants includes several that either do not actively participate or switch sides, depending on the issue at hand. In the Gulf, Oman maintains

a studied neutrality and has served as a venue for secret US-Iranian meetings. Qatar often makes its own way, and its surrogates in Syria also sometimes march to their own drummer. Even the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which coordinates closely with Saudi Arabia in Yemen and Syria, is pointedly skeptical of the Saudi promotion of Wahhabism, a particularly intolerant conception of Islam.

By the spring of 2015, the prospects for an Iranian nuclear deal with the United States, the four other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and Germany had become a consuming topic of debate in the region. After the deal to lift sanctions on Iran in exchange for curtailment of its nuclear program was formally signed in July 2015, the key Arab states did not try to sabotage the agreement but instead sought to win significant concessions from the United States and its negotiating partners, including new arms packages that would give them an even greater military advantage over the Iranians than they already enjoy.

In contrast, Israel endorsed a US lobbying campaign by a number of pro-Israel groups to defeat the agreement through congressional action. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed the US Congress in March 2015, openly opposing the negotiations with Iran. Whatever the merits of the prime minister's arguments, his speech to Congress was an extraordinarily direct assault on the foreign policy of the United States. His government has been reluctant to embrace the initiatives of President Barack Obama in other realms, too, specifically the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Obama's call for regime change in Syria. Yet now Israel, too, is expecting a generous new package of military aid from Washington.

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Iran deal. Yet neither the major Arab states nor Iran has the means to transform the battlefield, and ISIS also lacks the ability to do so. This means that in the larger conflicts, such as those in Syria and Iraq, it remains doubtful that a decisive outcome will be achieved anytime soon.

SYRIA'S CROWDED WAR

The civil war in Syria has persisted for nearly five years, and barring a negotiated settlement there is no reason to expect that the bloodshed will soon subside. Among the major opposition forces, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, the Free Syrian Army, and the Kurdish People's Protection Units, there have been some operational coalitions, but these are tactical arrangements that may be short-lived and imperfectly respected. Other major oppositional elements—notably ISIS—have usually foresworn battlefield coalitions. Instead, they insist that rival groups accept their proclaimed leadership role. Scores of smaller groups add further complexity to the battlefield, given their proclivity to align opportunistically with stronger regional forces. The recent addition of Russian air power in support of President Bashar al-Assad's regime complicates the equation even more.

The fluidity of the battlefield, the tendency of external forces to provide support to favored groups, and the spread of crime—including the kidnapping and execution of suspected enemy supporters or alleged apostates—all divide the opposition. There is nothing close to a conception of an acceptable end to the fighting that the rebel groups can agree on, beyond an end to the Assad regime.

The Syrian government has benefited from the intervention of friendly foreign forces, especially since 2013. In particular, the battle-ready fighters of Lebanon's Shia militant movement Hezbollah have substantially bolstered the fighting abilities of the government. The fact that most of the forces supporting the regime are made up of Shia Muslims, who are fighting in support of a governing structure that is heavily controlled by the minority Alawi population (an offshoot of Shia Islam that accounts for about 12 percent of the population), adds to the perception that the Syrian war is heavily sectarian. About 74 percent

of the Syrian population is Sunni, a majority of whom oppose the regime.

Even so, it bears emphasizing that the government in Damascus retains the support of roughly half the Syrian population, including substantial numbers of Sunni Muslims, as well as Christians and Druze. Wealthier Sunni families who have benefited from the opening of the economy under Assad and are likely to be found in the largest cities, especially Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs, help to explain the persistent support for the government.

The Syrian army has shrunk since the civil war began. Casualties, defections, draft evasion, and suspicion of Sunni recruits have all taken a toll on enlistment in the regime's ground forces, which are far smaller than might be expected. The major units still fighting are largely the Fourth Armored Division and the Presidential Guard; both are dominated by Bashar's brother Maher, who was seriously wounded in 2012 but

remains in control. The regime has enabled a variety of local militias, known as *shabiha*, to operate based on the understanding that they are armed by and owe their allegiance to the government, but whatever they can plunder for

themselves is fair game.

The Assad regime has received support from neighboring Iraq, where the majority Shia dominate the government. Iraqi Shia militias have deployed forces to Syria, especially to protect religious sites revered by their sect.

Far more important has been the support of Iran, which has provided substantial on-the-ground support, including the presence of General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, the foreign wing of the Revolutionary Guards Corps. It is less clear whether regular units of the Iranian ground forces have been dispatched to Syria. But there have been repeated reports of senior Iranian commanders killed in ambushes, aerial attacks, and other combat encounters. Iranian supplies, including armaments and munitions, are a major reason the Syrian government has been able to sustain its forces.

The flow of Russian war supplies has also been crucial to keeping the Assad regime afloat. Syria has long maintained close relations with Russia (as it had formerly with the Soviet Union).

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Russia's only overseas naval base is in Tartus, on Syria's Mediterranean coast. The arrival of Russian warplanes in September 2015, soon followed by a bombing campaign, has breathed new life into Syrian government ground forces. Though described inaccurately by Moscow as anti-ISIS in focus, the Russian airstrikes initially were concentrated in northwestern Syria, not the main areas of ISIS domination in the northeast, which government forces have evacuated. The Russians struck only a handful of ISIS targets, and instead mainly targeted opposition groups that more directly threaten government forces. Almost all of those groups have enjoyed support from the United States or its allies.

Key supporters of the opposition forces include Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. Their beneficiaries vary. Turkey describes Syrian Kurdish forces as equally if not more problematic than ISIS. Riyadh forswears support for ISIS, but the strict variant of Sunni Islam promoted in Saudi Arabia displays more than a passing resemblance to the ideology of ISIS. The UAE tends to support more moderate Islamist forces, whereas Qatar is inclined to support groups such as Jabhat al-Nusrah (linked to al-Qaeda). In general, avowedly secular forces have enjoyed only modest support, often as a reward for aligning with far stronger Islamist groups. Expensive US efforts to equip, train, and promote nationalist Syrian forces combating ISIS have proved embarrassing failures.

VIENNA TALKS

It has become an article of faith that an end to the conflict in Syria requires a compromise agreement that would bring elements of the opposition into a governing arrangement with the existing regime. Previous attempts to reach such an agreement have failed, in large measure because the side that seems to be winning at any given point in time evinces no willingness to sacrifice its gains in a compromise with its enemies. In late October and November 2015, this proposition was tested again at international talks in Vienna.

There are two significant differences in this latest round of talks: Russia now plays a more obvious hand in supporting the government, and Iran, excluded from previous international talks on Syria, was invited by Russia to participate for the first time, with US concurrence. The two sides agreed to proceed with an acknowledgement that they disagree on Assad's future role, if any.

Iran's involvement in several of the region's conflicts, particularly in Syria and Iraq, is substantial and unremitting. It is hard to imagine a solution that does not take a few steps to accommodate Iran, especially in Syria. But it should be added that Iran's role in other regional conflicts, including the one in Yemen, is exaggerated.

The humanitarian situation in Syria and its spillover effects are increasing the pressure to find a resolution. About 250,000 people have already died in the Syrian war. Most have been killed by government forces. Precise numbers are impossible to discern, but given that the population was nearly 23 million in early 2011, it is clear that half or more of the population is either internally displaced or living outside Syria as refugees. The government and opposition groups are both responsible for the scale of the crisis, but ISIS has been particularly vicious in dealing with refugees.

More than three million people have sought refuge in the neighboring states of Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey. Smaller Syrian refugee populations have dispersed to other countries in the region, such as Egypt; there has been a major exodus to various European countries and beyond. The total refugee population is well in excess of four million.

ISIS: THE QUASI-STATE

Especially since its territorial conquests in Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014, ISIS has been a major part of the interrelated crises in the Middle East. ISIS has established a state-like dominance both in the Syrian city of Raqqa and in Mosul. The territory under its control spans the Iraqi-Syrian border. The fact is that this quasi-state will not soon disappear.

While US and allied air forces have engaged in an anti-ISIS campaign that began after the 2014 seizure of Mosul, their impact on the group's military capabilities has been limited. The air strikes have hampered larger-scale ground movements by ISIS forces, but recruitment of fighters has not been reduced at all. On the contrary, credible US reports point to an increase in ISIS recruits.

An October 2015 decision by Obama to send up to 50 special operations troops to Syria to assist in activities against ISIS represents a modest expansion of the American commitment, but does not suggest a major retooling so much as a small step toward demonstrating a continuing interest in shaping the outcome. As a result, Russian

bombers will need to be increasingly vigilant to avoid striking US-aligned forces.

Equally important, especially since the Syrian Kurdish forces will be prime beneficiaries of additional US efforts, the move is a signal to Turkey, which has already bombed some Kurdish positions in Syria. Indeed, the role played by the Turkish government has only added more difficulties to this complicated situation. It has done little to protect opposition groups in Turkey that have been hit by terrorist attacks attributed to ISIS, including an October 2015 bombing that killed more than 100 people at a demonstration in Ankara.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi army has been unable to do more than reverse several ISIS efforts to extend its influence in central Iraq. In November, security forces began an offensive to retake Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, which ISIS had controlled since May. In northern Iraq, the Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters have contained ISIS and ousted the group from the city of Sinjar in November. But absent a far more inclusive government in Baghdad, which is to say one more inclined to listen to Sunni grievances, along with a peace process for Syria that makes progress toward devolving power to the opposition while retaining a residual government, ISIS will be hard to uproot.

IRAQ'S MESS

Since 1958, when the monarchy of King Faisal II was overthrown, Iraq has seen half a dozen different governments come and go. The longest-ruling figure was Saddam Hussein, who gained power in 1979 and held it until the US-British invasion in 2003. While there is no doubt that Saddam and his close collaborators stole millions from the state treasury, the governments imposed during the post-Saddam years, though certainly different in terms of sectarian identities, have not significantly improved the quality of administration in Iraq. Indeed, in several key respects, including corruption, their performance is worse.

Today, Iraq is a mess. Large areas of the country are held by ISIS, much of Kurdish Iraq is a more or less autonomous region, and Sunni areas that have evaded ISIS control still reject the authority of the Shia-dominated central government. Whether non-state Shia militias or ISIS, the opponents of the government are often equipped with US-supplied arms originally provided to the army, which has an unfortunate tendency to lose them. The Kurdish *peshmerga* are largely armed by Europe and the United States.

While visitors who have met with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi report being impressed by him, his power is limited. He replaced Nouri al-Maliki, who remains a powerful figure and an active opponent of Abadi. Maliki was designated as a vice president in 2014; he has refused to step down as part of a government reform initiated by Abadi in August 2015, despite being ordered by the Iraqi Supreme Court to comply.

With oil prices low and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, Abadi's ability to regain control over the whole country is limited. His government is still deeply dependent on Iranian and US support. Without US aid, Iran's influence in the country would likely increase.

At a time when there is much talk of a Sunni-Shia clash in Iraq, the fact of the matter is that intra-sectarian tensions between pro-Iranian and pro-Iraqi Shia factions are easily of equal importance. The dominant authority in Najaf, the city in southern Iraq where four major Shia religious authorities preside, is Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who speaks powerfully in favor of pro-Iraqi factions. But Sistani is elderly and it is unclear who would replace him in Najaf. Only one of the remaining three clerics is Iraqi; the others are an Afghan and a Pakistani.

SAUDI INTERVENTION I: BAHRAIN

When antigovernment protests began in Bahrain in February 2011, there was little indication, notwithstanding claims from the Bahraini and Saudi governments, that outside powers had any significant role in supporting the protests. Bahrain's Shia majority has long chafed under the rule of the Sunni ruling family. Hassan Mushaima, the leader of the al-Haqq movement, did meet with Hezbollah's chief Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut that year, but the visit was routine. Al-Haqq was certainly one of the more militant groups, but its role in the protests was hardly dominant.

For the first few weeks of the demonstrations, the US played an active role in pushing for implementation of a reformist agenda. Key players included Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa and Sheikh Ali Salman, the head of Wefaq, the main Shia opposition group. Reports from usually reliable sources, including other participants in the discussions, indicate that substantial progress was made up to the eve of the Saudi-led military intervention in mid-March 2011. The crown prince was attracted by the possibility of reform, but neither his uncle, Prime Minister Khalifa bin

Salman al-Khalifa, nor then-King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia found the reform package appealing. Saudi forces rolled into Bahrain at the head of a Gulf Cooperation Council deployment.

In the ensuing period, Bahrain has attempted to return to business as normal, but with a majority of the population living under strict government control, reformists and militants jailed, and protesters persecuted for petty political crimes, this has proved an elusive goal. Saudis and other Gulf visitors continue to make weekend jaunts to Bahrain, but the small monarchy has lost much of the cosmopolitan character that made it special.

SAUDI INTERVENTION II: YEMEN

In Yemen, an offensive by the Houthi rebel group—which belongs to the Zaidi sect, a branch of Shia Islam—culminated in the capture of the capital, Sanaa, in October 2014, driving President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi from the country. With assistance from the UAE, and technical advice from the United States, the Saudis launched a heavy air campaign against the Houthis in March 2015. The bombing has enabled Hadi to regain a foothold in the southern port city of Aden, but his return to Sanaa is months away at best, and will likely require a deal with the Houthis.

Much of the country, which is water-deprived and poor, is isolated from supplies and living on the edge of starvation. Meanwhile, the air campaign has had the indirect consequence of rejuvenating the Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda. The bombing has forced the Houthis to retreat, especially in the south, but it has also inflicted tremendous damage on civilians, including a hospital supported by Doctors Without Borders that was bombed in late October, despite being clearly marked. As of November, more than 5,400 Yemenis had died since the Saudi intervention began.

Saudi Arabia has been intent on depicting the Houthis as an extension of Iran's interests. Yet Iran's ability to lend support to the Houthi fighters is quite limited due to its lack of access to Yemeni ports. Nonetheless, while the Houthis have been battered by the Saudi-led bombing, they retain support in Sanaa and northern Yemen.

Alongside the Sunni majority in Yemen, the Zaidis constitute a large minority and have often

played a leading role in politics. But it is important to note that their worldview and understanding of piety leaves them rather far removed from mainstream Shiism. For instance, when the author was in Najaf in 2009, knowledge of Zaidism was limited even among senior Shia scholars. More to the point, in a detailed accounting of the origin of the students studying in Najaf (as well as in Karbala, less important but still a much respected scholarly center), there was not a single Zaidi in residence, nor were any expected.

THE PALESTINIAN IMPASSE

The mood in the West Bank and Gaza, and a wave of violence that erupted in September, including a spate of stabbing attacks by Palestinians, point to a new intifada, but one that is not led at the national level. This means that Israeli tactics used to isolate and control dissident areas no longer work very well.

But the really key question is whether the Palestinian quest for external support has produced a far less enthusiastic response than in earlier uprisings against Israeli occupation. The Palestinian Authority is a weak entity led by an aging figure, Mahmoud Abbas, whose political support is limited. The prospect of a poorly governed Palestinian state alongside Israel will probably not find much favor in conservative Arab Gulf states. In any case, the present Israeli government shows no particular desire for an independent state to emerge. Indeed, the configuration of a Palestinian "state" as espoused by Netanyahu sounds rather more like a dependency.

No matter how intensely advocates of Palestinian nationalism may pursue their cause, the fact is that a state requires an institutional structure that inspires support and confidence. Absent significant funding from the Gulf, as well as from Europe and North America, the Palestinian entity is unlikely to be both self-governing and financially secure for years to come, if ever.

Another important question, though little discussed, is what measures will encourage the Palestinians of Gaza, now under Hamas rule, to accept the formation of a Palestinian state truly able to govern. The prospect of living apart in a hermetically sealed chamber will not appeal to many Gazans.

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GOVERNANCE GAP

Competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran certainly forms a large part of the overall picture of regional strife. There are plenty of reasons for the Saudis and their allies to feel disconcerted by the upheaval that has swept the Middle East, and one cannot conclude an essay of this scope without a full acknowledgement of the role played by Iran in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Saudi-promoted media have worked hard to make that case.

In other countries, though, such as Bahrain, Yemen, and Palestine, the Saudis may have made matters worse with their own unforced errors. Meanwhile, the fatal trampling of more than 2,000 pilgrims, including hundreds of Iranians, during the summer 2015 hajj to Mecca and Medina (a casualty count well above the number acknowledged by the Saudis) added to the tensions, as

did Iranian claims of Saudi malfeasance in crowd management.

However, quite aside from these bilateral animosities, the unfortunate truth is that governance in the region is often weak and corrupt. Young people who want a normal life are offered little more than the choice of either submitting to force or fighting. If a group arises offering a more appealing vision, whether it be pious or even secular, is it so hard to understand why many will fight for it?

Do any states in the region offer hope for an improved future? Some no doubt do—Tunisia is one encouraging example—but the trends surveyed here reveal too many countries where millions of people are not well served by their governments. So long as that remains the case, the Middle East will continue to be riven by conflict. ■