



SEPAD

Sectarianism, Proxies &
De-sectarianisation

The Middle East in 2050

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Overview

In March 2021, scholars from the SEPAD collective engaged in two private roundtable discussions about the future of the Middle East in 2050. Tasked to reflect on the future of the region, sources of anger and possible ways of circumventing this anger, the scholars – leading figures in their respective areas – critically reflect on areas including: the nature of the state, peace building, (counter)revolution, mechanisms of control, security sector, the legacy of da'ish, drugs, sectarianism, geopolitics, the role of Iran, and the role of India and China. In doing this, contributors paint a challenging and somewhat bleak picture of the future of the region

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Precarious Politics and the Future of the State

Simon Mabon

As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, the contours of political life across the Middle East appeared to have entered a period of consolidation. Following the parabolic pressures of the previous decades - notably the invasion of Iraq, Arab Uprisings and ensuing violence and instability - stemming from the reticulate interaction of local and regional politics, a key challenge for rulers by the turn of 2020 was to work towards the survival of their rule and the betterment of their societies, albeit haunted by questions about the nature of social inclusion and belonging (Mabon, [2020](#)).

In spite of many observing that the dreams of the Arab Uprisings have been extinguished, the roots of this frustration and anger remain. Central to this are questions about the very nature of political organisation and the ways in which relations between rulers and ruled may play out across the region in the coming decades. While not attempting to predict the future, in what follows I seek to identify a few areas for consideration in the coming years.

Although the challenges faced by futurologists are well known, it is worth stressing a few caveats at this point. Data used in what follows is largely taken from pre-covid19 datasets; it remains to be seen how the fallout from the pandemic will affect the social fabric of states across the region. Similarly, with a number of delicate fissures cutting across the Middle East, predictions about the future remain hostage to fortune. In spite of this, there are a number of challenges that can be identified moving forwards.

1. The Nature of States

The state will remain the predominant form of political organisation across the region. While there have been experiments aimed at fostering greater levels of political inclusion within the Gulf Co-Operation Council, or indeed, within a caliphate, the salience of the state remains. As Ibn Khaldun observed in *The Muqadimah*, politics is about the survival of the species, yet the nature of challenges facing rulers differs dramatically, conditioned by the peculiarities of time and space. Across the Middle East, a range of different forms of states exist, from monarchies to republics, replete with varying levels of democracy. Much of the anger that emerged in the 2011 protests stemmed from a combination of democratic deficits, frustration at the organisational capacity of the state, economic challenges, corruption, and demographic changes (Mabon, [2020](#)). The main point of commonality within states able to survive the protest movements did so because of their ability to mobilise the coercive capabilities of sovereign power, regulating life through controlling all facets of it. Yet these issues will remain pertinent in the coming decades. Much of what happens in the coming decades will be shaped by the resilience of states- and their often-embedded leaders - and the extent to which the status quo will serve as a source of security for elites (Valbjorn, [2019](#)).

2. Areas of Uncertainty

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing states in the coming decades concerns developing fluid responses to change. Three main areas will shape the nature of political life in the coming years: demographics, economics, and geopolitical.

Demographic Change

According to a [UNICEF](#) report, the population of the Middle East will increase dramatically by 2050, from a population of around 500 million in 2020, to 724 million in 30 years. Within this increase there is a sizeable youth bulge which places a particular set of pressures on states. The challenges facing some states are more severe than others. UNICEF estimates suggest that in Egypt, the population will grow by 60 million by 2050 while in Iraq the population will increase by 45 million.

These demographic changes open up existing social cleavages within states, notably around questions of identity and belonging (sectarian affinity, ethnicity, gender, nationality), the role of religion, age, and geographical location. The complexities of demographic change also increase intersectional challenges, exacerbating existing points of discrimination and xenophobia. Furthermore, as a [SEPAD report](#) notes, these developments and interactions take place in a heavily urbanised environment - 65% of the region's population live in cities, a number that will increase in the coming years - and cities are often sites of intersectional challenges. Adding to these projections are concerns about [environmental change](#), with suggestions that temperatures across the region will be 4 degrees C higher (Max Planck).

Economic Uncertainty

Economic uncertainty is perhaps the most important of these challenges in the coming decades. Demographic changes will mean that an estimated 300 million will be coming on to the job market by 2050, requiring the dramatic transformation of regional job markets ([World Bank](#)). An overwhelming majority of people polled in a 2020 Arab Opinion Index survey suggested that economic issues were the most pressing problems for their countries to address (Arab Centre, [2020](#)). A further 91% of respondents believe that corruption exists in their home countries, with some estimates suggesting that around [\\$1 trillion](#) has been lost to corruption across the past 50 years. Corruption, as Bassel Salloukh ([2019](#)) observes, is a key factor in protests in Lebanon, a point echoed by Toby Dodge ([2019](#)) in his analysis of Iraq.

As Melani Cammett ([2014](#)) observes, the distribution of largesse, resources and contracts has a key role to play in exacerbating communal tensions – mapped neatly onto the political system in the case of Lebanon – which increases anger amongst those not benefitting from this distribution. As hardships increase, the precarious conditions people find themselves in also increase, leading to spikes in anger, violence, and, as Lucia Ardovini argues in this collection, drug usage.

An additional challenge emerges when considering the transition away from a reliance on oil in ‘Rentier’ economies across the Persian Gulf. While some steps have been taken to wean economies off a dependence on oil - perhaps best seen in Saudi Arabia’s NEOM project - such efforts remain in their infancy and the true cost and human consequences remain to be seen. Moreover, as recent developments in Lebanon and Iraq can attest, bringing about economic reform – even if necessary – is rarely a smooth process. Although the distribution of oil and gas rent has historically been used by a number of states across the Gulf as a means of regulating political life, rising economic pressures stemming from diversification, dwindling oil prices and the covid19 fallout will make this increasingly difficult. In spite of this, demand for economic support, access to jobs and basic needs is rising. Without a dramatic transformation in relations between rulers and ruled, it is hard to see the situation changing. Despite the challenges ahead, if the plans of Mohammad bin Salman (Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince) area realised, then the future will involve flying cars, robot cleaners and genetically modified humans (World Street Journal, [2020](#)).

Regional Security

The precarious nature of regional security underpins many of these concerns. Dating back to the Cold War, Middle Eastern security has long been shaped by the position of regional states within the context of broader international currents and the interaction of local and global politics. Any dramatic shifts in the global environment will, like other geographical locations, reverberate across the region, perhaps most likely including either a US pivot to Asia, or increased Chinese or Russian involvement. Such developments may well provoke the realignment of regional security, most notably for the Gulf monarchies who have long relied on Washington as a guarantor of security. The impact of this shifting security environment are discussed in more detail by Banafsheh Keynoush, Chris Phillips, and Guy Burton in this collection.

Prominent security issues of the moment will, most likely, have been resolved, most notably questions of Iran’s nuclear programme, and conflict in Syria and Yemen. While power sharing agreements have often been touted as a means through which conflict can be resolved, as John Nagle observes in this collection, the capacity of such agreements to facilitate a lasting peace remains to be seen. As such, the repercussions of the conflicts may well continue to resonate, a number of which will impact politics *within* and *between* states, particularly around the salience of violent groups - religious or otherwise (both Islamist and Jewish settler movements) - who challenge the very nature of the state. Questions about the role of religion within political projects have become more prescient in recent years, opening up new challenges for rulers.

3. Responding to Change

How states choose to respond to the aforementioned challenges will determine the nature of political life in the coming decades. The Arab Uprisings of 2011 were the manifestation of decades of socio-economic marginalisation but prompted a particular form of response from regimes across the region, (re)shaping the nature of social contracts or regulating all aspects of life in a form of creeping authoritarianism. Similar patterns can be found when looking at

responses to the covid19 pandemic, which suggest that creeping authoritarianism may be a feature of the coming years as rulers seek to hold onto power; this feature is discussed in more detail by Staci Strobl in this collection.

The ability to regulate life will be a key feature of the coming decades. In addition to a creeping authoritarianism, states have the capacity to regulate all aspects of life as a consequence of the ways in which society is ordered. In some instances, this ordering involves the manipulation of societal schisms in pursuit of regime/elite/group interest, perhaps most obviously leading to rising sectarian schisms (Mabon, [2020](#); Aldoughli, [2020](#)). The creation of lines of exclusion as a feature of governance and political life will continue, yet it remains unclear as to where these lines of exclusion will be found, ranging from nationality, ethnicity, sect, religion, class, tribe, political affiliation or otherwise (Mabon, [2019](#)). This issue is explored in more detail by Rahaf Aldoughli in this collection.

These strategies will be supplemented with the strengthening of security sectors, in the case of authoritarian states, often tied to ruling elites rather than the *polis* as a whole (Quinlivan, [1999](#)), an issue discussed by Maria Louise Clausen in this collection. While economic largesse has previously been used as a means of placating populations, increasing financial pressures may well curtail this capacity; indeed, taxes are steadily being imposed across Gulf states who have previously relied on their financial capacity to ensure stability. An alternative approach points to reform of social contracts in an effort to create greater investment and engagement with the state, supported by moves towards democracy, good governance, and respect for human rights. This would, however, require the transformation of relations between rulers and ruled, and the former embarking on compromises that they may not be willing to make.

Moving Forward

There is much that remains uncertain about the nature of states in the coming decades and the mechanisms through which they will regulate life and impose order (Mabon, [2019](#)). While the state will almost certainly remain as the central unit in regional politics, the nature of these states and relations between rulers and ruled is much harder to ascertain. Much of what follows will rest on the answers to three questions:

1. How successful will rulers be in addressing the intersectional challenges of demographic and socio-economic change?
2. What strategies will be used by rulers to regulate life within the state?
3. To what extent will regional dynamics shape local politics and vice versa?

The answers to these questions will reveal much about the vision of political organisation held by those in power, their capacity to regulate life, and the nature of political life more broadly.

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**Collectivizing Trauma and Narrative in the Syrian War:
Sectarianization and Ontological Security**

Rahaf Aldoughli

The Syrian conflict has often been described as a clash of identities between minority Alwaites and majority Sunnis (Balanche, 2018: xi; Lesch, 2012: 101). Today there is a significant trend in policy reports and academic scholarship toward describing Syrians through the lens of these sectarian and ethnic categories (Harling, 2012: 4). This shift is notable since throughout the many decades of the Baath regime, Syrians have been prohibited from any public claim to sectarian political identities. The homogenization of Syrian identity, based on an overarching Baathist secular-national concept that intentionally negated ethnic and religious differences, was a long-standing strategy used by the Assad regime to suppress internal conflict and maintain political legitimacy (Aldoughli, 2020).

The outbreak of the war fragmented this tenuous national identity, and with all parties in the conflict receiving open support from external actors (who often treat the arena as a proxy for their own international conflicts), many Syrians have been cast adrift when it comes to forging new perceptions of who they are as individuals. Ernest Renan said that “A nation’s existence is a daily plebiscite, just as an individual’s existence is a perpetual affirmation of life” (Renan, 1882). When the nation is shattered, however, this tenuously shared ontological vision is lost. Analysts have discussed at length the clashes of sectarian identities during the war (Abdo, 2013: 38-9; Sullivan, 2014: 11), as well as the instrumentalization of sectarianism by various groups for propaganda purposes (Hinnebusch, 2019; Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Valbjorn and Phillips, 2018). However, these interpretations have often overlooked how the rise of sectarianism in Syria serves an even more basic ontological purpose in re-securing a sense of identity in the wake of a lost national ideal.

In recent months, as the new “Clubhouse” app has become widespread in the region, ordinary Syrians have taken to this platform to discuss at length what sectarian identity means to them. As an observer and moderator of several discussion rooms related to belonging and identity, I have become more aware that sect in Syria is an increasingly existential concern, in a way that goes beyond consolidating authority, confirming power relations, or even religious practice. For many, the question of sectarian identity has emerged as a deeply felt psychological need after the collapse of the Baathist hegemony. This searching is taking place against a backdrop in which multiple groups are weaponizing Sunni identity and claiming representation of it (Aldoughli, 2021). Both the regime and opposition militias have become involved in promoting new concepts of Sunni identity—for the regime, there is a growing effort to champion “moderate” Sunnism as a Syrian state ideal, and to associate itself with Western concepts of “de-radicalization.” For some opposition militias, it is a matter of mobilizing Sunnism as a defiant identity to fight the regime.

In this article, I employ Jennifer Mitzen’s concept of ontological security as “security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice” (2006: 344). Mitzen uses this approach to discuss the irrational and oppressive behavior of state agents that cannot be explained as a logical effort to create physical national security, but instead only as an imperative to protect the security of identity. In this context, the Syrian state after the start of the uprisings in 2011 has shifted significantly toward securing a particular vision of Sunnism, to the point of abandoning its long-standing secular/neutral outlook. This, of course, is in response to the opposition’s rallying of a re-emergent Sunni identity as a mode of resistance. By describing the lines of the emerging war as a binary conflict between Alwaites and Sunnis, we risk overlooking this tug-of-war and the current amorphousness of Sunni identity in Syria.

Weaponizing Sunnism

The historical relationship between the Baathist regime and Sunni leaders in Syria has lurched between animosity and co-option. As early as the 1982 Hama massacre, the Baathist state under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad used extreme violence against civilians to eliminate any prospect of religious-based opposition. When Bashar al-Assad took over the party leadership in the year 2000, he oversaw a more accommodationist effort to bring into the national fold a larger coalition of local Sunni elites, some of whom had previously held hostile views of the regime and its secular ideologies. These accommodations led to an increasing overlap between state authority and legitimized religious teachings (Aldoughli, 2021). After the start of the war, these efforts at building bridges morphed into a much more rigid stance, in which the regime emphasized a dichotomy between “correct” and “false” Sunnism and began to promote a national-religious front. The resulting state discourse sought to establish firm boundaries between loyal Sunni citizens vs. disloyal opponents, with the latter group automatically painted as holding “false” religious views (Assad speech 2017).

Essentially, the Assad regime’s official discourse embraced a blanket characterization of any protest or opposition as grounded in Sunni religious fundamentalism, which it portrayed as heretical (Assad speech 2014; 2017). This has created a hardening of lines and a vicious cycle in which opposition militia groups who were not initially drawn to fundamentalism (some of them) have increasingly embraced it as a form of solidarity and ontological security. Some opposition militias have contributed to this process by emphasizing a sectarian victimization narrative. Meanwhile, the use of excessive violence by regime forces and associated militias against protestors should be understood not only as a way to affirm material power, but also as resulting from a perceived need to repair and re-consolidate the broken national identity by distinguishing between legitimate citizens and demonized Others (Wimmen, 2018: 60).

The intractability of the Syrian conflict results in part from the way in which ontological security has become linked to a need to annihilate the Other. Rather than falling into the trap of homogenizing Sunnis, Alawites, or any other sect/ethnicity in Syria, it is important to observe the struggle over identity and to recognize that much hinges on the question of, e.g., what kind of Sunni one wants to be. Applying ontological security as a theoretical framework

brings these issues into the foreground and provides a better understanding of how Syrians are actively reconstructing their social reality and identities. The increasing importance of sub-state identities in post-2011 Syria, whether ethnic, sectarian, or territorial, should be understood in light of the deeply personal process of psychological realignment resulting from the shattering of the national ideal. Although this process is taking place against a backdrop of instrumentalization and securitization of identity by multiple organizations, we should not disregard Syrians' agency as they navigate this conflicted terrain.

Sectarianization as a Form of Ontological Security

Understanding the role of ontological security in the Syrian War can help to clarify the logic of competing identities that strive for survival. The continuation of the conflict reinforces identities that are based on demonizing the Other, and in fact, the prospect of breaking free of the conflict can generate threatening ontological insecurity. A central aspect of this type of identity formation is the collectivization of trauma and victimization narratives, in which any harm, historical or current, is propagated to all who identify with the group. There are long-term consequences of this collective victimization, as it may become the epicenter of group identity and the lens through which group members interact with political movements.

For example, the regime has broadcast as part of its propaganda efforts numerous stories and reports that focus on discriminatory/abusive behavior by Sunnis against Alawites, focusing on the sectarian aspects of these conflicts (Lesch 2012: 108). Some opposition militias, for their part, have called for the immediate annihilations of Alawites. Antagonistic and sectarian rhetoric has become more prominent within Sunni discourse, as can be seen in the increasing influence of sheikhs such as Adnan al-'Arour, who on Safa TV Channel has mobilized militia participation and criticized Sunnis who are not part of the opposition. The need for ontological security and stronger forms of personal identity in a time of fear and anxiety has driven many Syrians to embrace this rhetoric, relying on collectivized sectarian trauma rather than a strong democratic national agenda as the basis of their political outlooks.

With the rise of the Syrian Democratic Forces as representatives of the Kurds in northeastern Syria, Syrian national army supported by Turkey, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (previously affiliated with al-Qaida) in northwestern Syria, the prospects for a unified democratic political movement against the regime have become increasingly dim. All of the involved parties are now engaging in competitive victimhood dynamics against other groups, with continuing violence overriding any hope of peaceful political transition or the emergence of a new form of shared Syrian national identity. As the situation becomes increasingly incoherent, the psychological imperative for ontological security through rigid self/Other demarcations will only become stronger.

Moving Forward

At the time of this writing, the Syrian conflict is far from resolved. The current constitutional committee has been unable to implement UN Resolution 2254 to establish a roadmap for peace talks. Doing so will require that we directly address the polarized social identities that have

emerged in Syria and the role of ontological security needs in maintaining the conflict. A few specific recommendations can be made:

- Opposition leaders should be called upon to adopt a more inclusive national rhetoric that goes beyond polarizing sectarian affiliations. Current opposition rhetoric fuels binarism and exclusion, which stands in the path of a democratic and peaceful solution.
- There is a need to establish mediation as a trust-building exercise prior to any peace settlement. Instead of using wajahat (tribal leaders) and sheikhs as part of the formal mediation process, local leaders without strong sectarian affiliations should serve as representatives of Syria's heterogenous communities.
- Empowering Syrian civil organizations, including feminist groups and youth in diaspora, is vital to help de-sectarianize the conflict. These groups have a strong investment in promoting narratives that prioritize citizenship and pluralism as the basis of national belonging.
- It is vital to neutralize the international manipulation and instrumentalization of different groups in the Syrian conflict, and to promote the agency of ordinary Syrians as a means to end polarization.

To break the cycles of violence and impunity that have destabilized Syrian society throughout the past five decades, there is a need to support a Syrian-led and Syrian-implemented transitional justice process. This will allow Syria to confront its past and to begin the process of building a sustainable peace. To restore the dignity of victims and empower them requires creating strong democratic political structures, restoring the rule of law, and securing a foundation for national reconciliation and compensation initiatives. Syrians need to reclaim their agency and political will from external actors and develop a national narrative that goes beyond politicizing and securitizing identities. Perhaps the voluntary dilution of these identities, which traditionally have been antagonistic and mutually exclusive, is the first step towards transitioning to internal peace.

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China and India in the Middle East in 2050

Guy Burton

What will the Middle East and its relationship with China and India look like in 2050? There are two ways to look at them. One is through an economic lens, which suggests that the future will follow current trends and trajectories. In this case, both China and India will be more important economic actors than they are today, given that they are expected to be the [largest and second largest economies](#) in the world. In addition, the growth in economic exchange will mean a corresponding rise in Chinese and Indian presence on the ground, in the form of various businesses and nationals, who will live and work there, leading to opportunities and risks.

Another way to look at the Chinese and Indian presence in the Middle East in 2050 is through a political lens. This perspective may be murkier than the economic one, given the range of possibilities associated with it. Opportunities and challenges may present themselves. They may include developments inside the region, in the form of rivalries and conflicts on the one side or consolidation into concrete blocs on the other, as well as from outside. In particular that could even involve a confrontation between India and China as part of a wider new Cold War, which could spill over into the Middle East.

Of the two scenarios, the economic one offers a more incremental account. But it also assumes that China's and India's economic growth levels will be maintained over the next 30 years as they have been in recent decades. In short, it assumes that growth will remain at around the same level as it has [between 2010 and 2019](#), when Indian GDP growth averaged around 5% or higher each year while China's was 6% or above every year. By contrast, should this level of growth not be sustained, then the following scenario may not apply. It would mean a less substantial presence and role for that Asian power in the Middle East's future. It would be less prominent and so weigh less on the minds of regional leaderships.

Working on the assumption that Chinese and Indian economic growth will continue in much the same vein that it has until now, it is likely that the proceeds of trade and investment will be felt more in some countries over others. That will be a consequence of the present situation, whereby [Chinese](#) and [Indian](#) economic exchange has been concentrated in the more politically stable and wealthier parts of the Middle East, including the Arab Gulf states, Israel, Iran and – for China in North Africa – Egypt and Algeria. There will be less willingness to risk investment in more volatile and conflict-affected places, as is currently the case in Libya, Syria and Yemen.

For both powers, the Gulf has been a key source of energy supplies, which has fueled both their recent and anticipated future economic growth. However, by 2050 it is unlikely that Chinese and Indian economic activity will be dominated by oil and gas. Both powers have announced their intention to reduce their carbon footprint: India's prime minister, Narendra Modi declared India's aim to [reduce its carbon footprint by a third](#) over the coming decade while China plans to be [carbon neutral by 2060](#).

The move away from oil and gas will complement Arab Gulf states' own efforts to prepare for a global post-oil economy through [diversification](#). Indeed, [non-energy related business activity](#) has already been growing between the Gulf, India and [China](#) and is set to continue, including in manufacturing and technological transfer to investments in property, healthcare and financial services.

Both China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's large diaspora in the Gulf have been and will be important contributing elements to the expansion and diversification of economic exchange. By 2050 it is likely that the bulk of Chinese investment and infrastructure projects in the region will be reaching completion and through which additional Chinese firms and entrepreneurs may find their way into the region, leading to a [growing Chinese diaspora](#). That may echo the Indian experience: whereas previously Indians were concentrated in blue collar, less remunerated sectors, [today's 8.5 million nationals](#) range from construction workers to accountants and from scientists to captains of industry.

The increase in the size of the Chinese and Indian presence in the region by 2050 – both in the form of businesses their people – presents both an opportunity and a risk. On one side, they could provide an important source of influence on regional governments in their relations with Beijing and New Delhi. Similarly, they may have greater weight when it comes to lobbying Beijing or New Delhi on issues that directly affect them.

On the other hand, they may also be at risk, whether from insurgent groups and violent non-state actors or from regional governments themselves. Should that happen, Beijing and New Delhi would be under pressure to reduce any danger, including [evacuation of their nationals](#) – much as they did in the wake of the uprisings in Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2014 respectively. Both efforts required significant logistical effort and coordination at the time. Given the likely greater number of businesses and citizens on the ground in the future, doing the same may well stretch either state's capacity.

Politically, how China and India respond to uncertain events and upheaval may require a different response than today. Currently, both Asian powers have tried to avoid direct involvement in the conflicts and crises that have swept the region since 2011. To that end, [China](#) and [India](#) have emphasised their opposition to outside interference in the internal affairs of other countries and expressed their preference for political solutions over military ones, backed by support from regional bodies and organisations. At the same time, while they have criticised Western interference, they have largely turned a blind eye to the role of others in regional conflicts like Syria, Libya and Yemen, including Russia and regional powers like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Turkey and Egypt.

[Chinese](#) and [Indian](#) realpolitik has also been expressed in their overall approach to regional conflicts and rivalries: namely, a strategy of hedging. That makes sense in a region that is currently in a [state of transition](#): where a hegemonic power like the US is (perceived to be) in decline, where several regional state actors are competing but unable to overcome each other,

and where several states have weakened to the point that the multipolar competition is played out in proxy conflict.

By 2050 it may be the case that this instability has crystalized into a more concrete settlement. In contrast to the multiple bilateral relations that exist today (and were highlighted by Christopher Philips in his intervention), they may have consolidated into [opposing alliance blocs](#) (perhaps around Arab Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Israel on one side and Iran and Turkey on the other).

Should this be the case, then the current hedging strategy and avoidance of risk that Chinese and Indian policymakers are pursuing today may no longer be an option. For one, given the expected increase in Indian and Chinese presence and activity in the Middle East by 2050, which will make it all but impossible for them to avoid being caught up in any regional tensions and rivalries. In addition, they may find that efforts to maintain positive relations with both sides could lead to suspicion arising by the other. In such circumstances then, Beijing and New Delhi may find themselves having to make a choice as to where their main interests lie. In sum then, despite their efforts to stand apart from regional conflict, the two Asian powers may be drawn into them.

So far, the Middle East has been portrayed as a source or site for tension with either Asian power. But the region could similarly be a space for Sino-Indian rivalry as well, especially if the [influence of other external powers](#), like the US and Russia, diminishes as a counterweight. There are longstanding, historic [differences and tension points](#) between the two, including over their borders and respective spheres of influence. In South Asia, Indian leaders resent China's partnerships with Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar as well as what they see as an encroachment over their preponderance in the Indian Ocean – especially after China's establishment of a [naval port in Djibouti](#) in 2017. In Central Asia [the two are competing](#) for political influence and greater economic exchange through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which extends to the port of Gwadar and India's development of Iran's Chabahar port and connection via Afghanistan.

Although the race between Gwadar and Chabahar may be resolved by 2050, the Sino-Indian rivalry may have slipped its regional moorings. A wider global confrontation between the US and China is crystalising, one in which India may play a more active part through its [participation in the Quad](#) alongside Australia and Japan.

If unchecked, this wider struggle between India and China could manifest itself beyond their immediate neighbourhood, including in the Middle East. Just as the region became a site of competition between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, a similar development could emerge in which states in the region are forced to choose between Beijing and a US-backed India.

Looking ahead then, what does the likely expansion of Indian and Chinese economic activity in the Middle East and possible political polarization and tension – whether at the level of regional states themselves or between China and India – mean for other external parties, like Britain? Although Britain is keen [to project itself globally](#), it may find that its status as a middle power means find the environment more challenging and the range of options more limited than its leadership hoped. Although the British government has marked the Middle East out as an important partner in terms of forging security ties and encouraging more trade and investment (especially in the science and technology sectors), they may find themselves squeezed out by competition from Indian and Chinese business. In addition, they may find that the prominence of both states means that British interests may receive less attention by regional leaders.

Consequently, powers like Britain may find it necessary to be smarter in the ways that they operate to achieve their goals in the Middle East. That may mean cultivating regional governments over their relations with China or India, or with the governments in Beijing and New Delhi over issues of mutual interest. That could also mean building ties beyond the state level, including with the variety of Indian and Chinese businesses, organisations and individuals who will be based in the region as well.

Disposable Lives: Bahrain's Sacrifice Zones

Staci Strobl

The crisis of political repression in Bahrain continues to challenge Western foreign policy approaches to the country. Long-standing United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US) alignment with the Bahraini regime has perpetuated an abysmal human rights record in the country, essentially relegating marginalized and politically repressed Bahrainis to *sacrifice zones*, whereby their lives and their communities are rendered less important than geopolitical, strategic considerations. Given Western democracies' purported interest and moral obligation to promote democratic and liberal values, the *sacrifice zones* are stark markers of policy failure.

The question of a policy trade-off falls into a larger theoretical debate in the scholarly literature. Jonathan Gilmore (2014) presents the question as one of UK national interests versus its moral values. He uses the sale of armored vehicles to Saudi Arabia, for use in quelling the Bahrain uprisings as one of the many examples of the UK sacrificing human rights values for its economic and political interests. Gilmore advocates for a disaggregation of national interests and moral values in policy development, so that the values-orientation can be better considered. Further, the values orientation is fundamental to the success of the interests orientation. In the case of Bahrain, sustainable regional safety and security involves confronting the incubation of unrest and violence that the Al-Khalifah regime cultivates through its brutality. The status quo is dangerous to both geo-political interests and to human rights.

Indeed the situation in Bahrain is a product of Western priorities that include balancing power in region (against the perceived threat of Iran), maintaining a military presence in the Persian Gulf with Bahrain as a major installation, keeping oil resources secure, promoting domestic arms industries, and stymying perceived incubators of religious-based terrorism. To be fair, these geopolitical goals come with some symbolic effort by the US and UK to decry human rights abuses. President Biden (2021) has articulated the aims of pushing back authoritarianism and "defending equal rights the world over" as the cornerstone of his administration's foreign policy. The UK government makes similar overtures, albeit many commentators have observed that human rights have even less of a billing under Prime Minister Boris Johnson (Law, 2017). Meanwhile, both governments ally themselves strongly with Bahrain despite its authoritarian behavior, such as state-perpetrated political oppression of its majority under-class community, Shi'a, indigenous (*Baharna*) and/or those who are critical of the government.

The nature of the on-going political repression in Bahrain has been well-documented in recent publications that forefront the struggle for civil and human rights, in particular Marc Owen Jones' *Political Repression in Bahrain* (2020) and a recent report from the human rights group SALAM for Democracy and Human Rights entitled *Decade of Oppression* (2021). Together, these two works, the first scholarly and the other scholarly-activist in nature, make an important dent in correcting a monarchy-centric narrative about the unrest and political dissatisfaction that typically minimizes the scope and scale of human suffering.

To cite a few examples, there have been over 400 citizenship revocations of Bahraini dissidents since 2011, 23 death sentences deemed “political” by human rights groups since 2014, the documented use of mass trials which result in criminal punishment, and the torture of hundreds of the several thousands of political prisoners in the country. Meanwhile police are consistently acquitted for torture and murder after questionable and violent behavior in the line of the duty. Over 100,000 foreign Sunnis have been naturalized since 2011 (ostensibly to artificially shift the sectarian demographic) (SALAM DHR, [2021](#); Strobl [2019](#)).

Although the Al-Khalifah regime bears the most responsibility for the treatment of its subjects, the problem is compounded by the lack of effective engagement by Western allies. The US and UK are at minimum complicit with these abuses, but more likely can be characterized as enabling them (through arms sales, a continued military alliance, and economic investment in the country). As a by-product, marginalized communities in Bahrain are essentially transformed into *sacrifice zones*, where residents’ suffering at the hands of an illiberal and violent regime occurs daily, yet they are abandoned to their difficult situation by the international community.

Sacrifice zones have both social and spatial characteristics. Borrowed from Environmental Sociology and Anthropology, the construct was initially developed to explain the abandoning of poor, minority neighborhoods and territories within Western democracies to toxic waste and pollution. Inhabitants bear the human costs, such as poor health and even death, unwittingly sacrificing themselves on the altar of capitalist, industrial production (Taylor, [2018](#); Scott and Smith, [2017](#); Little [2016](#); Lerner [2010](#)), their lives considered “disposable” by the larger political and economic system (de Souza 2021, p. 226). “While sacrifice may be personalized, it is socially contextualized and couched in and by a broader web of [political] pathologies,” and the zones are known for their landscapes of both ruination and survival (Little, [2016](#), p. 10).

Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco ([2013](#)) took the concept of *sacrifice zones* further by arguing that *sacrifice zones* go beyond environmental injustice; they are zones of political and economic structural malaise in late capitalist societies, where human suffering in certain places can be ignored under the rationale that it serves more important interests. David Taylor ([2018](#)) refined this expanded version of *sacrifice zones* explaining that the following more general attributes characterize these places.

First, *sacrifice zones* are an abandonment of a geographical location by the political-economic order but justified on political-economic grounds. They serve to maintain the power and control of national and international elites outside the zone, while also legitimizing existing social inequalities. Second, the *sacrifice zones* are space-based constructions by the state where existentially problematic dissidents and political activity is said to stem, and where the purported political threats to the unity and well-being of the country originate. Consequently, the state abandons the zones in terms of protecting civil and human rights (as well as withdrawing adequate social services). Simultaneously, it also over-polices the zones to

squelch the perceived threat. In essence, the ideological construct of people in these zones as inherently criminal and state-threatening forces their very bodies and violence against those bodies to be the means of the meaning-making of others (Taylor, [2018](#)).

Taylor's treatment of *sacrifice zones* acknowledges parallels to Giorgio Agamben's discussion of the refugee *camp*, in which internal borders within a state are marked by the withdrawal of social and political protections. For Agamben, the *camp* embodies the contemporary problem of reducing internally-excluded people to *bare life*, or the state of being stripped down to mere physical existence, mere body, or even relegated to the animal world, "...a binary distinction between those who are fully human through their participation in political life and those who are outside..." (Mabon, [2020](#), p. 13). *Camps* are demarcated as places occupied by usurpers, and racial, ethnic, or religious differences further justify the abandonment. State violence is used in order to control any solidarity or political activity originating in the *camp* (Taylor, [2018](#); Agamben, [2020/1995](#)).

A prime example of one of the Bahraini *sacrifice zones* is the village of Diraz, in particular from 2016 to 2018, when it was besieged by security forces that blockaded the village, controlled movements in and out of the village, put down non-violent protests, and interfered with religious observances (Jones, [2020](#); ADHRB, [2016](#)). Although Western powers paid lip service to human rights, consequences were insufficient to compel the government to back down from the siege for two years. This predicament was an extension of the more routine governmental containment of mostly Shi'a, often indigenous (*Baharna*) neighborhoods and villages, engineered to be behind walls, separated from wealthier Sunni neighborhoods, and inconvenient to and from major thoroughfares as well as the gaze of expatriates (Strobl, [2011](#); Mabon, [2020](#)). The situation is nothing less than a divided society where structural inequalities and political stalemate can be mapped onto the geographic delimitations of Sunni and Shi'a communities to a noticeable degree (Mabon, [2020](#), pp. 161-163). One of the primary "audiences" for the ordering of space in this way are internal and external Sunni communities (Mabon, [2019](#): 42) who cohere in part by defining themselves against the Shi'a, indigenous others (Strobl, [2018](#)).

Further, marginalized and repressed Bahrainis increasingly recognize their political situation as at a violent stalemate, leading to frustration and despair that can once again, like during the Bahrain Uprisings, bubble into significant unrest and violence. As [Bahrain Mirror](#) (2018) explains:

Sacrificing citizens does not protect other citizens' security, nor does it protect the state's sovereignty or its monopoly of violence, it rather opens the door for rights organizations, states, and counter-violence forces to interfere. The state would therefore lose its security, peace, and stability. This is a barren sacrifice; it is more likely suicide, or stabbing oneself (no page number).

Bahrain Mirror further states “... the ruling family secures itself from evil, through barbarically sacrificing its citizens, thinking this will repel evil phantoms” and “[t]his violence expands the profits of groups at the expense of other groups” (no page number). Similarly, Americans for Democracy and Human Rights has long called the death penalty in Bahrain a political “sacrifice to the state” (ADHRB, [2015](#), p.1):

More broadly, Bahrain] ultimately employ[s its] capital punishment mechanisms to maintain the security and autonomy of the monarch[y], at the expense of the public. The weight of the sword falls heaviest, and most deliberately, on the development of civil space, rule of law, and sustainable human security in the Gulf; a sacrifice to authoritarian stability (ADHRB, [2015](#), p. 9).

In 2018, government-dissolved political party Al-Wefaq tweeted that the revocation of Ayatollah Sheikh Isa Qassim’s Bahraini citizenship was another of many Shi’a sacrifices to Bahrain authoritarianism. And Jeremy Corbyn took a strong stand on Twitter in 2016 that “This week in Bahrain, we have seen the Prime Minister sacrifice human rights on the altar of the arms trade,” enthusiastically liked and retweeted by individuals and organizations critical of a recent arms deal.

Of course, sacrifice zones do not just exist in Bahrain, but throughout the region. Perhaps the starkest example is in Palestine where communities in the Occupied Territories are tightly controlled, socially and economically depressed, and besieged militarily— a sacrifice to Israeli security. Oren Yiftachel ([2010](#)) looks at Israeli nationalism from the point of view of that territory has strong symbolic importance for the nation, arguing that the project to secure and settle territory essentializes and segregates group identities. In particular, the *hitmahlut* (settlement) project literally encircles and chokes off the Palestinian state, creating distinct zones of despair also marked by ethnic, religious, and socio-economic differences.

UK relations with Israel have grown stronger in recent years due to expanding trade agreements and on-going arms sales. US alignment with Israeli nationalism also grew under the Trump Administration. Although from both the US and UK, there is aid going to Palestine and articulated support of the peace process, these overtures pale in comparison with the material bolstering of the militarized Israeli state. Meanwhile, Palestinian communities continue to stew in a sacrifice zone of hopelessness and despair with no end in sight.

Similarly, the sacrifice zones in Bahrain show no signs of diminishing. Officials from both the US and UK consistently meet with Bahrain officials and reiterate strategic partnerships with little caveats and no necessary conditions around Bahrain bettering its human rights record. Meanwhile, the sacrifice zones in the country become sites for continued resistance to the government, taking a stale mate since the events of the Arab Spring into an ever-present potential for renewed violence.



SEPAD

To counter the current state of burgeoning unrest in Bahrain, UK and US foreign policy must meaningfully push for legal and security reform, broad representation of groups in the apparatuses of the state, the release of political prisoners, the rejuvenation of prohibited political parties and civil society, and political momentum toward measures that would counter social and economic inequality and spatial isolation in indigenous and Shi'a communities-- all overseen by an international observer such as a United Nations Special Rapporteur. Failure to do so should be met with meaningful sanctions by Western countries, such as a moratorium on the sales of arms and other security equipment for any purposes, radical economic divestment in the country, removal of military bases and related personnel to other locations in the region, and the rewriting of defense agreements.

To the extent that other countries would attempt to fill the void of material and moral support to Bahrain, such as Saudi Arabia, similar sanctions can be applied to them, essentially reordering Gulf regional foreign policy into alignment with human rights values case by case, leveraging American power (at least for now) as the world's largest military and economic power. Nothing less will make good on the lip service to human rights in the West; otherwise the human suffering in *sacrifice zones*—and its incubation of violent unrest— will stand as dangerous markers of foreign policy failure.

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What Divides People and Makes them Angry?

Lucia Ardovini

Drugs in the MENA: an unexplored force shaping anger, divisions and discontent.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is at the centre of numerous investigations, which see regional powers, international actors and policy makers tracking conflicts, foreign policies and shifting alliances. The key matters that are usually identified as driving anger, division and grievances centre around issues such as territorial disputes, sectarian tensions, proxy conflicts and deteriorating social contracts. Yet, while these are well researched and indeed capture what is at the root of general insecurity and growing authoritarianism in the region, there is a largely unexplored force that cuts across all of these issues: drugs. Their production, usage, smuggling and criminalisation come with significant geopolitical concerns and directly relate to state-society relations, porous borders, militias and dark economies. Yet, when it comes to the MENA region, this is still a remarkably unexplored topic – beyond the identification of Afghanistan as a major opium producer and Turkey as a main harbour for transportation (McHoy, [2018](#)). So far, the only region-wide study of drugs in the MENA is Philip Robins' (2016) *Middle East Drug Bazaar*, which lays the basis for a more complete geopolitical understanding of their consumption and trade. In order to fill this gap and evaluate the role that drugs play in fuelling sources of anger, divisions and grievances that are likely to shape instability across the region in the next 30 years, this report looks across three main levels: the regional and geopolitical level, the state level and the societal level.

On the geopolitical level, the region is known as a major producer and smuggler of drugs, with certain countries associated to specific products – Morocco to cannabis, Egypt to opiates such as Tramadol, and Lebanon to various kinds of amphetamines, most notably Captagon, which was reportedly used by Daesh's fighters (al-Imam et al. [2016](#)). Production in the region is usually approached from the perspective of neighbouring Europe and shaped by concerns about drugs making their way into European markets through illegal trafficking, but there is also a lot to be said about the growing trafficking within the region itself. This not only highlights increased levels of consumption, but also points to how increased political instability and prolonged conflicts are preventing states from effectively policing these activities. The ongoing political instability in the region has in fact created the perfect conditions for production and smuggling, specifically through the growing number of porous borders and contested territories that fall outside of the authority of the state. These are the locations in which non-state actors of various denominations, ranging from militias to narco-jihadi organizations, take control of these operations to finance their activities. However, in doing so, they are also creating parallel economies and often stepping into the gaps left by state when it comes to economic support, meaning that very often drug production is the only reliable source of income for a lot of growers and makers. Most notably, this is the case for specific parts of the population such as the youth and persecuted minorities, which tend to be side-lined by state institutions and failed by weakening social contracts between rulers and ruled (Barzoukas, [2017](#)). Therefore, drugs production and smuggling at geopolitical and regional level has clear security

implications, but it is also likely to grow into a significant threat to the legitimacy of states and ruling elites.

This becomes clear when looking at how these forces play out at the state level. The increased production and trafficking of drugs across the region reveal key weaknesses in the state apparatus, but is also indicative of high levels of corruption and compliance. There is a lot of emerging work on trafficking in the MENA that points directly to the corruption of state officials and institutions as key actors, which therefore links back to issues of governance and accountability (Gallien [2020](#)). While this is dependent on national contexts, in areas like the Maghreb there are historical instances of the state allowing production of certain drugs because of its inability to provide employment, economic support or an alternative livelihood (Herbert and Gallien [2020](#)). This is quite significant, especially because the region has some of the harshest penalties for drug-related charges in the world, often including the death penalty, therefore highlighting quite high levels of contradiction and structural issues, especially when it comes to the role of the state as a provider. Nevertheless, the consequent development of parallel dark economies speaks directly to one of the most common popular grievances and source of anger across the region, which is that of high levels of unemployment and the overarching lack of state support.

Lastly, on the societal level, the region as a whole has seen a very significant increase in the use of all drugs, including heroin, from 2012 onwards, revealing that alienation, discontent and structural inequalities remain a feature of several Arab states. The latest Arab Youth Survey ([2019](#)) revealed that consumption has skyrocketed, with 76% of the Youth in the Levant alone agreeing that this is becoming a widespread phenomenon. There are some very clear societal reasons for this, once again linking back to long standing grievances and issues of unemployment, representation, lack of opportunities, repression and instability. This is particularly evident in places like Syria and Iraq, where decades of conflicts and instability are contributing to alienation and to rising rates of consumption, specifically of methamphetamines, because of how easily and cheaply they can be produced (Rubin 2019). Another worrying societal trend is that there are increasingly evident class and sectarian connotations to drug use and production, with marginalised communities, internally displaced persons, and the poorest parts of the population relying on drug smuggling and production for survival. Another issue that contributes to this and remains largely unaddressed, specifically in the case of Syria, is the trauma caused by recent and ongoing conflicts and by the lack of any sort of support from the state, that therefore leaves citizens with very little coping mechanisms outside of drug use (Abazid et al. [2020](#)). Lastly, a key societal issue and a growing source of anger and discontent is the fact that this phenomenon keeps on being criminalised and persecuted rather than addressed with appropriate policies.

This is also becoming a health problem, putting a strain on already inadequate healthcare systems, with a documented rise in HIV and hepatitis (Arab Youth Survey [2019](#)). Yet again, there are nowhere near enough facilities to care for this. As an example, Bahrain only opened its first rehab clinic a couple of years ago and in Egypt, which has a population of over 100

million people, there are only 22 rehabilitation facilities, most of which are private (International Drug Policy Consortium 2020). Hence one can see that, because of the lack of appropriate policies and responses, the role that drugs play in fuelling anger and discontent is likely to grow exponentially over the next 30 years.

To conclude, looking at the rise in drug production, trafficking and consumption can tell us a lot about simmering sources of anger across the MENA. The three main takeaways one should be looking out for are that 1) this phenomenon is exacerbated by state's failure to care for their citizens, especially in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings; 2) rising rates of unemployment, regional instability and the growth of authoritarian measures are all disintegrating the already fragile state-society relation at the core of many regimes; 3) in such a context, alienation and the lack of opportunities are directly linked to escalating rates of drug abuse, which, if it is not addressed quickly, will definitely become a contributing factor to eroding state legitimacy and insecurity moving forward.

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Managing the legacy of ISIS in Iraq and Syria

Jacob Eriksson

Despite the triumphalism of former US President Donald Trump and former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, ISIS has not been comprehensively defeated in Iraq and Syria. Although no longer a coherent, territorial entity spanning both countries, ISIS has reverted to its insurgent roots and continues to constitute a significant threat to civilians and local authorities. In order to defeat ISIS, the current militarised counter-insurgency campaign needs to be complemented by support for sustainable political solutions. However, as has been evident in previous stages of the war against ISIS, the multiple conflicting interests of local and international actors in both Iraq and Syria complicate this pursuit. A successful strategy must address localised needs, yet simultaneously also acknowledge the trans-national nature of conflict dynamics.

In Iraq, a combination of cross-sectarian rejection of ISIS, war fatigue in Sunni-majority areas (Coles & Nabhan, [2018](#)), and what Fanar Haddad ([2019](#)) has described as the waning political relevance of the Sunni-Shia divide are causes for optimism. However, this should not be misconstrued as an unquestioning acceptance of the post-2003 political settlement. The government has yet to address the root causes of ISIS such as Sunni disenfranchisement, perceived injustice, insecurity, and poor governance (Mabon & Royle, [2017](#); Wicken, [2013](#)), with militants able to exploit continuing security vacuums across northern and western provinces. Rather, it has adopted an overly militarized and punitive approach at the expense of peacebuilding activities geared towards institutional reform, accountability, and rebuilding social relations.

The security landscape remains highly fractured, with a combination of Iraqi Security Forces and militia of the Hashd al-Shaabi continuing to operate in formerly ISIS-held territories. There is often significant mistrust among residents toward the latter groups, particularly the powerful pro-Iranian Hashd such as the Badr Organisation and Asaib Ahl al-Haqq. Not only are these considered external forces, but due to predatory economic and security practices, a lack of discipline, and an absence of accountability, they have been likened to a mafia (Author interviews, 2018a & 2018b). Certain Sunni tribal militia have been included within the ranks of the Hashd, but Inna Rudolf ([2020](#)) argues that this cooperative relationship remains transactional, highly conditional, and potentially temporary.

Moreover, pro-Iranian Hashd formations and Iraqi Security Forces have been implicated in numerous war crimes against Sunni civilians (Human Rights Watch, [2015a](#), [2015b](#) & [2017](#); Amnesty International, [2016](#) & [2017](#)) without any justice or accountability. Prosecutions have focused exclusively on ISIS members who are tried under counter-terrorism law (No. 13), a statute which criminalises membership of a group but does not adequately distinguish between specific crimes committed. Such a limited approach risks recreating the negative effects of previous transitional justice processes such as de-Ba'athification by creating a sense of

collective punishment among the Sunni population and feeding into the victimisation narrative of extremist groups (Author interview, 2018d; Revkin, [2018](#)).

In addition to a lack of equitable justice, there has also been a lack of socially focused reconciliation activity to repair Iraq's social fabric, with reconciliation considered primarily a political issue. A summary of the Implementation and Follow-up National Reconciliation Committee strategy (IFNRC, [2018](#)) articulates its vision in terms of agreeing the distribution of wealth and state power, with all citizens entitled to justice, equality, and parity. However, there are few specifics as to how this goal is to be reached, which processes are integral, and how they are to be managed, specifically how to improve grassroots social relations and build trust following the war against ISIS. While the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is providing technical assistance and supporting socially focused initiatives such as Local Peace Committees (LPCs), Iraqi and international peacebuilders alike have been critical of such initiatives, arguing that the purpose, procedures, and outcomes of the LPCs were not clear (Author interviews, 2018a, 2018c & 2018e). Due to the lack of a coherent strategy that links the grassroots and national levels, such well-intentioned initiatives have limited efficacy and may in fact further harm public trust by failing to manage and meet expectations.

Iraq's approach to peacebuilding has thus been characterised by a top-down approach focused on the narrow interests of the political elite rather than inclusive, participatory, bottom-up activities. This has been further illustrated by the October 2020 agreement between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central government in Baghdad on governance and reconstruction in Sinjar, which appears to have been guided primarily by geopolitical rather than local concerns, with little meaningful local input (Hassan & Khaddour, [2021](#); Mako, [2021](#); Porter, [2021](#)). The deal pledged to remove external armed groups from the area, including those affiliated with the PKK, an actor of specific concern to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), their Turkish allies, and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhim. After coming to the defence of the Yazidi community against ISIS, PKK elements enjoy local support among some in Sinjar and have embedded in the community. Pro-Iranian Hashd groups, meanwhile, continue to be present in pursuit of their own interests and implementation has been slow, with little progress on the creation of a new local security force pledged as part of the deal.

The geopolitics of the Sinjar case also highlight the wider impact and relevance to Iraq of the ongoing Syrian conflict (al-Khoei, [2016](#)), where the evolution of the north-eastern theatre has provided opportunities for ISIS to regroup. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) played a central role in the territorial defeat of ISIS, but have since had to contend with the partial withdrawal of their US sponsors, the Turkish invasion of Rojava, and the return of the Assad regime to SDF-held areas. ISIS has continued to take advantage of this fluid battlefield and a lack of effective authority in eastern Syria. Conflicts persist between the SDF and local Arab tribes opposed to Kurdish authority, while the porous border between Iraq and Syria continues to allow for the traffic of ISIS personnel and resources (Kittleson, [2020](#) & [2021](#)).

The Global Coalition Against ISIS face unenviable choices. In Iraq, attacks by pro-Iranian Hashd against Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) personnel will likely continue as Iran seeks to evict US forces, but withdrawal would be highly damaging to Iraqi security capabilities and allow ISIS to further strengthen. It may also heighten tensions between Shia political leaders, many of whom support a withdrawal, and Sunni and Kurdish leaders who do not (Soufan, [2020](#)). In Syria, the Trump administration squandered significant leverage by withdrawing without a negotiated agreement among the conflicting parties, and damaged relations with their SDF partners. Unwilling to engage in concerted diplomacy to stabilise the north-east, it is now doubtful whether the US has the credibility to do so. In short, it is difficult for Western actors to have a lasting positive impact, but simultaneously clear that their withdrawal would have a negative impact.

In light of this, there are three concluding questions that require further reflection. First, although militarised counter-insurgency is a necessary component, it can only ever be a means to accomplish political goals. Recent history of Western intervention in Iraq in particular shows that there are clear limits to what external powers can accomplish and the suitability of externally mandated goals to the local context. What is the relationship between the political goals of CJTF-OIR and its partners in Iraq and Syria? Are they compatible? Second, this piece has argued for more locally rooted peacebuilding activities in response to community desires for accountability and reform, but how can these be effectively supported in the absence of requisite political will on the part of relevant Iraqi and Syrian authorities? Finally, a third related question: what are the potential consequences of engaging directly with and empowering alternative local actors in the absence of the state?

These considerations should be central to a broader trans-national peacebuilding strategy that focuses on local dialogue and diplomacy, not just militarised counter-insurgency. Moreover, they highlight the need to think not just about the quality of peace but the future nature of the post-war states of Iraq and Syria, and crucially what the relationship is between the two. If we fail to acknowledge or address this interdependence, there is a heightened risk of both a continued short-term resurgence of militancy and active conflict, and perpetuating the underlying conditions that create conflict. Such outcomes that necessitate further long-term international military commitments are not in anyone's interest.

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Is Power-Sharing Dead? Some Suggestions for the Way Forward

John Nagle

Power-sharing has become a key instrument of constitutional designers to cease violent conflict. Beginning with Lebanon's Ta'if Agreement in 1989, power-sharing has been adopted or been prescribed for managing ethnic and ethnonational conflict in deeply divided societies, stretching from Macedonia, Burundi, Bosnia, Sudan, Northern Ireland, Kenya, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Power-sharing is a divisive system. Proponents claim that power-sharing is the best choice for inclusive statebuilding in the aftermath of intrastate violence (see Wolff [2011](#)), while critics argue that it cements divisions and fosters dysfunctional governance (see Taylor [2006](#)). Yet, although power-sharing may be the preferred framework for divided societies, it is notable that there is a downward trend in power sharing agreements.

In the period 2005-2021, only one major power-sharing agreement has been signed in an effort to end civil war – Sudan. The reason for this is not simply attributable to a decline of intrastate conflict. In fact, as a UN report notes, in 2016 more countries experienced violent conflict than at any time in nearly 30 years and the death rate had increased tenfold from the post-Cold War low of 2005 (Marc [2016](#)).

The conflicts that have emerged out of Arab Uprisings – most notably Syria, Bahrain, Libya and Yemen appear –have been identified by scholars and policymakers as suitable for power-sharing (Heydemann, [2020](#)). Yet, the prospect of the respective belligerents entering into a power sharing pact in Syria, and Yemen, or Libya appears remote (see Mabon [2020](#); Salloukh [2020](#)).

What, then, is causing the retreat of power-sharing agreements over the last decade? And, in outlining some of the factors underlying this trend, I ask what needs be done to salvage power-sharing.

The Lack of External Actors

External actors have facilitated power-sharing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Sudan and Macedonia (McCulloch and McEvoy [2018](#)). To a degree the rise in post-cold war power-sharing coincides with what has been termed the 'American Moment', a period marked by US' status as an unrivalled superpower. Alongside the US, other external actors have played vital roles in the implementation of power-sharing. Burundi's Arusha Accords were overseen by the France and the Organisation for African Unity.

Yet, crucially, many of the hot or frozen conflicts today suffer from the want of constructive external actors willing to deploy their influence to craft power sharing pacts. The wars in Syria

and Ukraine, in particular, involve Russia in both cases and Iran in the former. In addition, Syria features interventions by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and a limited response by USA. Such conflicts which contain a high number of belligerents and interested parties are notoriously difficult to resolve due to the multiple claims and demands advanced by the respective actors.

The civil war in Syria is particularly illustrative regarding external actors and power-sharing. Most prominently, key policymakers within the UN, especially Lakhdar Brahimi, then the UN Special Envoy to Syria, called for a power-sharing solution between the regime and the opposition forces. These efforts to impose power-sharing in Syria, however, have borne little fruit with Lakhdar Brahimi calling his role [‘mission impossible’](#) (BBC 2015).

Brahimi drew his conclusion from how the civil war has become enmeshed within a proxy conflict, particularly with Saudi Arabia attempting to reverse Iran’s growth in regional influence since the 2003 Iraq war. Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran currently demonstrate little appetite or need to promote power-sharing in Syria.

The influence of Iran and Russia in Syria runs parallel to the withdrawal of the USA as a leading player across the Middle East. In the aftermath of the debacle of the occupation of Iraq, US power has undergone retrenchment. Marc Lynch (2015) captures this as ‘right sizing’ the US’s footprint in the Middle East by reducing its political and military investment in the region. As a consequence of this, rather than promote power-sharing, US policy in recent years has, in some instances, led to the collapse of power-sharing agreements, such as Iraq.

Complex Conflicts

It is a redundant point to note that conflicts are complex. They are never simply about one issue; instead they encompass a wide range of grievances that differ across and within regions, and groups are never homogeneous in their political aspirations and identity.

There is a question, however, regarding the extent to which many contemporary conflicts can be understood as displaying clear divisions that correspond to a divided polity. Syria and Libya, places where proponents prescribe power-sharing remedies, are not quintessentially divided places like Northern Ireland and Bosnia defined by conflicts of ethnonationalist self-determination. It can, of course, be argued that the conflict Syria quickly took on some of the features of group polarization. Rounds of ethnic cleansing, massacres, and desecration of religious sites, have all been conducted along sectarian lines. While sectarianism is not the cause of the civil war, it has become a reality in the violent conduct of state forces, the various militias and in the modes of interpretation of the conflict deployed by international actors (Phillips, 2016).

Research on the Syrian conflict highlights the analytical tool of intersectionality proves useful in understanding and dealing with the multiple cleavages simultaneously interacting in Syria today. Syria is thus a lot more complex than a mere sectarian divide, and therefore needs a

conflict resolution process that can address the myriad different issues happening concurrently (Mahmoud and Rosiny [2018](#)).

This issue about the complexity of contemporary conflicts pose challenges to designers of power-sharing agreements. On the one hand, the strength of power-sharing is that it gives rights and protections to the main sectarian or ethnic groups. Yet, on the other hand, power-sharing is exclusionary by limiting conflict to one dimension – ethnic or sectarian – it typically excludes and marginalizes groups that are not ethnic. Thus power-sharing systems are often poor when it comes to the issue of gender quality, rights for LGBTQ and migrant groups (Nagle [2016](#), [2018](#), [2020](#)).

Some Suggestions

Is power-sharing dead or does it still represent the best tool to help build democracy and security in postwar contexts? Three key issues need to be addressed in order to answer this question.

- Can power-sharing systems be applied without the key role of external actors? In brief, it seems doubtful that in many cases the respective belligerents in intrastate conflicts will hammer out power-sharing agreements without being forced to do so by powerful external actors. The question, therefore, is whether these external actors may in the near future use their leverage to enforce power-sharing. The new Biden administration in the US may once again see power-sharing as a key instrument of its foreign policy, especially as Biden has a record – albeit chequered - of advocating power-sharing. Similarly, there is nothing inherently in the makeup of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Russia that suggests that they are intractably opposed to power-sharing. Given the immense economic burdens involved in maintaining proxy conflicts, it is not too fanciful to suggest that these states could support power-sharing in Syria and Yemen, in particular, if that allowed them to maintain some degree of influence in the postwar state where they have acted as third-parties.
- Can future power-sharing pacts protect and enhance gender equality, rights for LGBTQ population and representation for migrants? In order to do this, power-sharing requires a framework which deals with how various forms of inequality intersect in the dynamics of conflict.
- Given the complexity of contemporary conflicts, one way in which some of these issues can perhaps be dealt with is via more localized forms of power-sharing. Indeed, research demonstrates that while there is an apparent decline in national level power-sharing pacts, there has been a proliferation of local level power-sharing agreements, such as in Libya. These agreements provide more scope and potential for issues that are grounded in local dynamics to come to the fore.

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Geopolitics: What's 'New' about 'the New Middle East'?

Christopher Phillips

The late Fred Halliday, Professor of the International Relations of the Middle East at the LSE, remarked in 2005 that, “Everyone can remember one or two, probably more, occasions on which the region’s politics, all of it indeed, had been ‘transformed’ forever by some new event, be this a disaster, war or revolution” (Halliday [2005](#), 6). He noted how, seemingly once a decade, seismic events would rock the foundations of Middle Eastern geopolitics, whether it be 9/11, the 1991 Gulf War, the Iranian Revolution, the Six Day war or the Suez Crisis. Yet he urged caution. For all the dramatic upheavals in the states directly impacted, for most Middle Easterners, the political, economic and social structures of the region remained the same.

Though Halliday sadly died before the Arab Uprisings, he would likely have applied the same warnings to the events of 2011 and their consequences. A decade after the stunning revolutions and counterrevolutions that swept across the Arab world in the early 2010s, it is all too tempting for international relations analysts to frame this as yet another ‘great turning point’ that has transformed the region and created a ‘New Middle East’ (Valbjorn and Hinnebusch, [2019](#)). Yet, how much has actually changed? Some states are stronger, some are weaker, but the basics of the region’s geopolitics remain as they were before 2011: a collection of independent states, mostly autocratic, competing and aligning with each other and external actors to further their interests. While some living in states like Syria, Yemen and Libya have seen dramatic transformations, for most the political, economic and social structures remain the same and are likely to continue to be so for decades to come.

Of course, Halliday was no reductionist and, indeed, argued that, “Nothing is inevitably transmitted from one generation to another,” (Halliday [2005](#), 16). Change and continuity are constantly interacting in the geopolitics of the Middle East, as they are elsewhere, and one of our roles as scholars is to identify when changes do and don’t take place and why. While this brief article can’t comprehensively cover all the areas of change that *did* occur as a result of the uprising, it seeks to identify four broad themes or shifts that have been catalyzed by the fallout from 2011.

The End of Unipolarity

The first shift was the end of unipolarity and undisputed American hegemony over the Middle East. Even before the Arab Uprisings, the dominance of the US in the Middle East was waning, but the consequences of 2011 accelerated the process, combining with American domestic factors and global shifts. Globally, the rise of China and the increased activism of Russia, notably in the Middle East, has prompted the end of the post-Cold War ‘unipolar moment’, even if it may not yet have ushered in a clearly multi-polar world (Layne [2012](#)). Domestically in the US, war fatigue after Iraq and Afghanistan has prompted three successive presidents, Obama, Trump and Biden, to be reticent to intervene heavily and ‘no boots on the ground’ has seemingly become mantra.

Regionally, after the disaster of Iraq, the US seems to slowly be recognizing the limits of its capabilities in the Middle East. Washington is still willing to wade into conflicts, as it did in Libya and against ISIS. It also has key interests that it prioritizes, such as Iran's nuclear capabilities, the defence of Israel and its array of Gulf bases. But its reluctance to get seriously involved in post-Arab Uprising conflicts such as Syria, Libya (after 2012) and Yemen, its acquiescence to a return to dictatorship in Egypt and its seeming acceptance of regional and global powers like Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia taking the lead in arenas it once dominated suggests the Middle East's short-lived 'Pax Americana' is over.

A related second shift was the increased activism of regional powers in what was perceived as a vacuum following American retreat. Iran had already benefitted from the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime after 2003, furthering its regional influence in Iraq and beyond. The post-2011 decade has provided further opportunities for Tehran to expand: deepening its physical role in Iraq and Syria, and boosting its ties to Hezbollah and the Houthis in Lebanon and Yemen (Juneau [2016](#)). Iran's great rival Saudi Arabia has responded by upping its direct involvement in regional affairs, abandoning its historically reserve. In an attempt to ward off Iran as well as its other regional enemy, the Muslim Brotherhood, since 2011 Riyadh has intervened directly in Yemen, initiated the Qatar blockade, sponsored a coup in Egypt and backed rebels in Syria's civil war.

Alongside these old rivals, the post-2011 era has seen new regional actors emerge while traditional powers have diminished. Syria has been consumed by conflict, as has Iraq, and neither seem likely to return to their once-prominent regional role. Egypt, historically a leading Arab power, is similarly less active beyond its immediate neighborhood after a decade of disruption. In contrast Turkey, once peripheral and preferring to face west, has emerged as a major actor. Not only has it militarily intervened in Syria, Iraq and Libya, it has promoted itself as the lead regional sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood, bringing it into conflict with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The latter has also become a surprisingly active player for such a small state, intervening in Yemen, the horn of Africa, Egypt, Libya and backing the Qatar blockade. Qatar itself was also temporarily more active, though has been chastened by the blockade and appears less ambitious than in the early 2010s.

Failing states and non-state actors

A third significant shift was the growth of failing states in the Middle East in which these regional players could compete for influence. In the decades prior to 2011, most Middle Eastern states were strong in the Weberian sense that governments had a monopoly on the use of violence and secure borders. There were a few exceptions to this: Lebanon, Yemen and, from 2003, Iraq, and those spaces became arenas for competition between regional rivals. The disruptions of 2011 added several more states to that list: Syria, Libya and, for a while, Egypt and Bahrain. The 2010s also saw these competing powers willing to plot against and disrupt rival governments not even experiencing civil conflict. Saudi Arabia, for example, successfully helped overthrow an elected Egyptian government (with the UAE), was linked to failed coups

plots in Jordan and Qatar and attempted to terminate a premiership in Lebanon (al-Rasheed, [2021](#)).

Rivalries between actors have seen new arenas of competition emerge, expanding beyond the Middle East. Russian-Turkish competition has been extended to Libya and Azerbaijan. The Horn of Africa similarly has seen a host of new bases built in the last decade by Turkey, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The rivalry between Turkey and the UAE has also extended to Cyprus, where the Emirates allied with Greece, Israel and Egypt to try to pressure Ankara away from contested gas fields.

Linked to the growth of failing states has been a fourth shift, the growth of non-state actors. Again, this is not new and non-state actors have historically emerged in arenas such as Lebanon and Iraq where the state has been weak. Therefore, the growth in the number of weak states alongside an increase in the regional and international actors willing to sponsor them has seen a corresponding growth in non-state actors. These range from transnational forces like ISIS or Kurdish groups like the PKK, PYD and allies, to highly localized militia based around particular warlords. Some national groups like Hezbollah and the Free Syrian Army have become transnational actors as their sponsors, Iran and Turkey respectively, have deployed them abroad.

A feature of this shift that again began before 2011 but was amplified by it is the preponderance of non-state actors based on identity politics. Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen have been dominated by groups attaching varying degrees of importance to Sunni and Shia Islam, while the Kurdish regions of Syria, Iraq and Turkey continue to be dominated by Kurdish nationalists. Ideology continues to have importance for some groups, and sometimes it overlaps: such as the Kurdish-leftist PYD and PKK, or Shia-Populists like Hezbollah or the Houthis.

Instability to come

These four shifts combine to present a geopolitical picture that looks quite different in the 2020s than at the beginning of the decade, before the uprisings. There are more unstable states, more non-state actors (local, national and trans-national) operating within them, and more regional and international powers willing to intervene in these arenas, either through sponsoring domestic players or deploying their own militaries.

With the United States' influence on the wane and neither China nor Russia seemingly interested or able to replicate its previously hegemonic position, it seems unlikely this instability will be ended by an outside force. Similarly, with power distributed fairly evenly across a range of regional rivals – notably Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, the UAE and Egypt – it also seems unlikely a regional actor or bloc will emerge to dominate and stabilize. In fact, the opposite seems more likely, whereby competition between these regional and international continues and expands, interacting with local and national disputes. If anything,

these structural shifts make it probable that previously stable arenas are sucked into the instability.

Of course, as Halliday would point out, this is not ‘new’. Regional competition in multiple arenas has been a feature of Middle Eastern geopolitics since at least the end of the Ottoman Empire, if not before. However, while the methods may seem familiar to the past, the sheer volume and scale is something different. The number of weak states, non-state actors, regional and international powers involved is a significant change, and one that points to further geopolitical instability in the coming years.

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Emerging Challenges by 2050: Iran's International Relations Banafsheh Keynoush

As an aspiring strong middle power in the Persian Gulf region, Iran is faced with three alternatives to face the international challenges that impact its immediate foreign relations by 2050. Iran could reshuffle its existing political order in its entirety, opt to retain its present system of governance while gradually assimilating with leading regional and international trends, or remain steadfast in expanding its revolutionary agenda and aspirations. It is likely that the Islamic Republic of Iran will develop modalities to combine these alternatives when it can ensure power and security.

The re-shuffling of Iran's existing political order is a product of its domestic politics, and the interactions between Iranian domestic priorities and the international security system. The ambiguity of U.S.-Iran ties in the foreseeable future makes it difficult to predict its full impact on the regional sub-system. But the murkier these relations remain, the more volatile are Iran's regional and international interactions. Simultaneously, the more likely it is that Iran's neighbors will develop alternative policies to shield against tensions in US-Iran ties.

Iran could opt to assimilate with major regional and international trends that emerge, be it with its immediate neighbors, or with other Asian countries. By necessity, a level of assimilation is to be expected. Iran is already engaged in merging its economy with its neighbors in Afghanistan, Central Asia, Eurasia, and with Russia and China. Furthermore, looking south, Iran remains a key political and security player in the Persian Gulf, and the international maritime routes which it connects to. Hence, Iran is likely to contribute to emerging regional orders that partly supplant Iran's lack of steady ties with countries like the United States.

It is likely that Iran will combine its desire to merge with emerging regional or international orders with its steadfast unlimited strategic aspirations to remain a revolutionary influence in world events. In this event, Iran will remain a fluid actor when it comes to managing its regional and international relations. This fluidity will impact Iran's international relations on several levels, as it struggles to remain a strong middle power to face the challenges ahead.

Firstly, it will increase Iran's desire to engage in para-diplomacy, by granting the sub-state or non-state actors which it supports a greater voice in regional and international political processes. Secondly, Iran will seek to enhance the security capabilities that these sub-state and non-state actors have, so as to grant them more prominent negotiating power with adversarial groups. Thirdly, Iran's actions will cultivate relations with willing countries, but serve to undermine inter-state relations on a regional and international level. Regionally, this may place Iran at odds with its neighbors who traditionally depend on strong inter-state relationships to advance foreign policy. Internationally, Iran's actions will grant it more power to build strategic parity to contain U.S. power when their interests clash (Keynoush [2021a](#)).

The fluid dynamics of Iranian foreign policy making in the foreseeable future imply that international relations with Iran should shift to include wider engagement with the same sub-state and non-state actors over which Iran currently has more influence. This entails engagement by the U.S. and the West with groups such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the Iraqi paramilitary groups. Some level of engagement has already occurred, but it is insufficient. The U.S. and western powers should build strategic parity by containing exclusive Iranian influence over these groups. This may require stepping down somewhat from the moral high grounds that the U.S. and western democracies set to demonize Iran and its partners at all times, in favor of engagement. Otherwise, Iran and its partners may emerge victorious in advancing their exclusive regional interests.

Finally, Iran will by necessity need to engage with a host of other actors including the Taliban, and groups currently considered to be terrorist organizations, in order to ensure the security of Iran's borders. To this end, Iran can play an effective role if its interests are included when other regional or international powers develop policies of engagement or non-engagement with these groups. If Iran's interests are disregarded, Iran is likely to remain a major influencer as an engaged member of the international community (Keynoush [2020](#), [2021b](#)).

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Security provision and external actors in Iraq – insights from a recent survey

Maria Louise Clausen

The Iraqi government faces substantial economic, political and security related challenges which intersect with Iraq's complex relations to international and regional actors. One of the key factors in the sustainable stabilization of Iraq will be building a professional security sector, especially as the internal Iraqi security situation remains volatile. This volatility is reflected in a recent national survey carried out in Iraq, where close to 72% of the surveyed Iraqis described their personal security as only partially or not at all ensured.¹ However, who the main culprits are for the widespread insecurity, as well as the role played by external actors, is disputed. Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), although formally defeated, continues to present a threat. There are frequent attacks and assassinations in its former strongholds, and serious concerns that the group is re-gaining strength to commit larger attacks gained credence by the double suicide attack in Baghdad in January 2021 that killed more than 32 people, the deadliest attack in the capital in three years (BBC [2021](#)).

Simultaneously, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) significantly influence the economic, political and security situation in Iraq. Whereas some Iraqis continue to emphasize the role played by the PMFs in defeating ISIS, others are increasingly focusing on how they undermine the Iraqi state and can persecute critics with impunity. There has been a steady stream of assassination of activists who have publicly criticized the Iranian-backed PMF such as the internationally respected analyst, Hisham al-Hashimi (Haugbolle and Andersen [2021](#)) But the security role of the PMF in Iraq is complicated by the fact that the PMF cannot just be reduced to Iranian proxies. Many of these groups are embedded in Iraqi society, and some PMFs enjoy symbiotic relations with Iraqi security forces (Mansour [2021a](#)).

Whereas most actors inside and outside Iraq can agree on the need to counter the threat posed by ISIS, ISIS is not the only source of insecurity in Iraq. In fact, the surveyed Iraqis pointed to the rivalry between Iran and US as a having a slightly larger impact on their personal security than ISIS (Clausen [2021](#)). The increased tensions between Iran and the US, that reached a highpoint with the January 3, 2020 U.S. strike that killed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, founder of the Kataib Hezbollah and the de facto leader of the Popular Mobilization Forces, outside Baghdad airport, has had a destabilizing effect on Iraq. The strike led to increased pressure on the Iraqi government to expel remaining American troops from Iraq. This pressure has been spearheaded by militias aligned with Iran, such as Kataib Hezbollah, and supported by Iran. However, this

¹ For this nationally representative survey 1,606 interviews were conducted by the Independent Institute of Administration and Civil Society Studies (IIACSS), which is the only representative body of GALLUP in Iraq. The interviews are proportionate across Iraq's 18 governorates, and are gender and age balanced. Due to COVID-19 restrictions the survey was carried out by phone, using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). Data collection was done in December 2020 and January 2021.

should not be read as uniform resistance to Iraq sustaining a close relationship to the US, nor implicit support for Iran.

There has been an uptick in attacks on US bases and forces. This seems to have, at least in part, been an attempt by some actors inside Iraq to act like spoilers, and to trigger an American response that would turn popular sentiment against the US. These actors should be distinguished from the growing nationalist sentiment that was vocalized during the 2019 protests (Clausen [2020](#)). Moreover, whereas there has been growing discontent with the involvement of external actors in the security sector in Iraq, 30% of the surveyed Iraqis responded that they do not believe the Iraqi security forces would be able to maintain security in Iraq without any outside support. It is of concern that, when taking a closer look at perceptions of the US presence, 38,2% of the respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that the US undermine internal Iraqi security, whereas 51,3% disagreed or somewhat disagreed.

However, divided opinions on the role of the US in Iraq are dwarfed by the growing anti-Iranian sentiment in Iraq, that is particularly critical towards Iran's large role in Iraq. This change became clear during the 2019 protests which showcased that Iran is no-longer exempt from critique in Iraq (Watkins [2020](#)). This was supported by data from the survey that saw a majority of respondents (69,5%) pointing to Iran as having played a negative role during the COVID-19 outbreak in Iraq, making Iran the country getting the most negative evaluation. Similarly, few (12,6%) agreed or somewhat agreed that Iran should be only actor helping Iraq maintain security. There are fears in Iraq that if the US withdraws from Iraq, this can create a void that can be exploited by Iran (or others).

Iraq is currently facing a severe economic crisis, as well as political insecurity as Iraqis have lost faith in the political system. The fear is that Iraq will continue in a cycle of conflict and chaos (Clausen [2019](#)). Whereas the current transitional prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, seems open to reform, the deeply entrenched network of politicians, armed groups, businesspeople, and societal leaders that would see their power reigned in, are resisting (Mansour [2021b](#)). This is a structural problem that cannot be reduced to any single individual or group of individuals but instead threatens the very foundations of the Iraqi state. A key aspect of this is to avoid the economic and political instability that leads to further destabilization of the security situation including a resurgence of Islamic state. However, as pointed to in this brief intervention, ISIS is by far the only actor having a negative impact on the feeling of personal security among Iraqis. Hence, an overly narrow focus on ISIS risks missing the point for Iraqis. Moreover, the current focus on stabilization among international actors in Iraq might have the unintended side effect of bolstering the Iraqi elite network that currently presents the most fundamental threat to the Iraqi state and population.

As a way of conclusion, it will be a challenge in the coming years to balance the desire for stability with the need for fundamental reform in Iraq. Moreover, there is a recognition in Iraq that the support from US and Europe is necessary. However, the divided opinions on the presence of the US and NATO forces should be recognized, and lead to reflections as to how



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this presence, meant to stabilize and increase security in Iraq, can, to a greater degree, be experienced as doing that by ordinary Iraqis? Finally, the security sector in Iraq suffers from internal factionalism, and the PMF play a controversial role. This begs the question of how to assist the integration of PMF into the Iraqi state in a way where these organizations are under the control of the prime minister and not the other way around?

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Prospects of Revolution in the Middle East: A Question of Resources

Ibrahim Halawi

Revolutions are not predictable events. They do not follow a formula, nor a linear process in which anger culminates into a large scale uprising. If anything, anger more often leads to apathy or cynicism. It can also lead to organised crime or small-scale protests or riots, all of which rarely affect or define the political system.

The ability to do something more than a usual protest or a riot – ie revolution, especially under authoritarian regimes, requires the mobilisation of strategic resources, or access to strategic resources that the state has not yet acquired. This all occurs before the televised moment. By resources I mean loyalties, knowledge, wealth, capital, arms, and technological and communication tools, among others.

In that sense, studying the prospects of revolts in the Middle East, of any size and magnitude, depends on our knowledge of the mobilizational capacity of opposition of any type or form.

In the context of the Arab Spring, one key resource took centre stage in analysis: social media. Among many scholars, pundits, policymakers and media, these revolts are often referred as “Facebook revolutions” (Bayat, [2017](#)).

Indeed, the moment itself was only possible at that specific time because the opposition mobilised strategic technological resources that were, at the time, still unacquired by regimes. But the revolution itself is the culmination of decades of oppositional efforts. For once, the opposition was one step ahead in resource mobilisation. The virtual public sphere replaced the censored physical space.

It took Arab states few years, if not months, to co-opt the new strategic resource (Fatafta, [2020](#)). And by doing so, turning it from an oppositional resource into a resource used to monitor and discipline oppositional figures with great efficiency, as well as co-opting the narrative (Herrera, [2015](#)).

Now most Arab states went further: their security budget includes huge investments in cyber security and surveillance, which has evolved into discursive disciplinary infrastructure, that links not only social behaviour, but consumer behaviour to political risk (Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy [2019](#)). Chinese technology has overtaken traditional American and European cyber security products (Wang, [2021](#)). Some suggest that Huawei systems and Hikvision cameras allow governments to spy on citizens (Blaubach, [2021](#)).

And when it comes to small breakthroughs in social media; whether its new apps that re-ignites the unencumbered virtual space or apps that encrypt activity, governments rush to shut them down or purchase a surveillance system that can decrypt them.

Yet not all countries afford state-of-the-art cyber systems. And even when they do, the economic and social repercussions of year-long shutdown are likely to trigger some degree of unrest.

But in the absence of an organised opposition which can amass resources and utilises them strategically, and the technological capacity to pre-empt the formation of such an alternative, the resulting tensions are unlikely to take a political turn. In other words, despite different forms of local unrest, it is unlikely produce a revolutionary government. The only foreseeable potential for revolution is, therefore, from within the establishment, the military or the bureaucratic elites. For those to take such daring initiatives, they usually coordinate with external powers. Otherwise, cycles of violence and coercion won't necessary disrupt 'politics as usual'.

Between Counterrevolution, Revolution, and COVID-19

Counterrevolution, which I also understand as being pre-emptive, processual, and long-term, has been fortified across the region (Halawi, [2020](#)). Regimes have provided one another with lessons and resources, as they learned (if they did not know already) from the domino effect of the Arab Spring that their survival depends on one another (Lynch, [2016](#)).

The economic crises that are unfolding as a result of COVID-19 will push authoritarian regimes to invest with greater urgency in surveillance rather than in ushering their societies out of the crisis with the least possible damage. The skilled middle class will seek to immigrate, as the local economy becomes increasingly unable to produce skilled jobs. Those who fail to do so, and those who do not have the skills in the first place for sustainable employment, are prone to occasional rioting, or organised crime, that do not pose structural or existential risk to the political system. Individuals and groups who might pose a risk are unlikely to outsmart the algorithms of counterrevolution, a combination of Chinese, Israeli and Western surveillance systems. Therefore, they will be 'neutralised' before the very act of revolt, unless they acquire a new technological resource which, neither I nor governments are yet aware of.

Conclusion

Based upon this perspective on revolutionary prospects, there are three key takeaways. Firstly, Lebanon is most prone to revolution. The political system is structurally paralysed. The economy has shrunk by half in one year. External patrons are no longer as invested in its traditional elites, and the opposition does indeed have resources to mobilise and challenge the system – but it is yet to present a radical alternative project. Secondly, the mobilizational capacity of opposition in other countries is very narrow. So, even if large-scale protests erupt, and they might, in other countries in the region, the absence of organised political opposition imminently reduces the possibility of turning these protests into a revolution pursuing power. Thirdly, in the absence of resourceful and organised opposition, protests, then, become pressure points which traditional elites capitalise on to set scores or advance their positions within the same system. In this context, the prospects of revolution are from above: ambitious military or



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bureaucratic elites who turn against the establishment, often conspiring with regional or international powers.

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Conclusion: Anticipating the Future of the Middle East

Simon Mabon & Elias Ghazal

There is little doubt that the years leading up to 2050 will pose serious challenges to states across the Middle East. From climate change to demographic change via nuclear negotiations and challenges to the social contract, states face serious challenges to their very survival. How rulers – and ruled – respond to these often-intersectional challenges will also have serious repercussions for the organization of political life in the coming decades.

Domestic Factors

Efforts to develop stability across the region are conditioned by internal and external structural factors. Within the territorial borders of states, the nature of political organization faces an array of serious challenges. Demographic developments will place huge pressures on the social fabric of states and economic institutions designed to help regulate life. Precarious economic conditions have resulted in a rise in the production and trafficking of drugs which is a source of anger and insecurity. To counter this, states must do more to meet the basic needs of their citizens through creating stability and job opportunities.

Yet there is limited confidence in rulers and public institutions to do this. While Arab publics generally have high trust in the national army and to a lesser extent the judiciary, trust in the executive and legislative branches of governments varies considerably across the region but on average is less than 40 per cent.² Governments handling of the coronavirus differs from country to another, and that reflects on the confidence of citizens in their rulers.

With ongoing protest in Iraq and Lebanon, there is increasing dissatisfaction with the political and economic status quo. Such frustration is not limited to Iraq and Lebanon, but scope for revolution is determined by: 1) the existence of organized political opposition – either formal in the guise of parties, or informal); 2) the availability of resources and the ability to mobilize them by opposition forces; and 3) the stubbornness and ferocity of the ruling regime. As the Arab Uprisings has shown, popular protests are routinely met by a portfolio of measures designed to ensure regime survival, from economic incentives to coercive mechanisms. As states face increasing economic pressures, a resort to violence appears more likely.

Regimes are in an equally precarious position. Elite's manipulation of transnational identities proved useful for mobilizing people towards short term gains, but it failed to produce institutions and structures that promote stability. Regimes are under mounting pressure to implement economic reforms that create sustainable jobs and improve the nation's wealth. For that to happen, it is necessary to plug into the global economy. This is where rulers must make economic decisions and related political alignments that are detrimental to their tenure. The

² <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/06/the-arab-worlds-trust-in-government-and-the-perils-of-generalization/>

future of the Middle East is thus related to the posture that states take from the competition for economic dominance between the two global heavyweights, US and China.

People's dissatisfaction and anger may also lead to a rise in violent groups, which reflects a growing sense of abandonment and a lack of belonging. To successfully counter such developments, a military counter-insurgency campaign must be supported by a transnational peacebuilding strategy focusing on local dialogue and diplomacy. This must be done in coordination with state security forces and members of civil society. The role of the state is critical for ensuring legitimacy and sustainability. Grass roots programmes, on the other hand, are fundamental in addressing inequality and marginalization. The state must be kept in check by a healthy public that is enabled by the international community. At the same time, civil society organizations must be monitored by state officials to ensure that they are not manipulated by foreign powers.

In the following years, as the case of Syria has shown, the construction of a form of monolithic identity defined in security terms against the other will have serious repercussions for inter-communal relations and political life more broadly. Observing the struggle over identity – and rejecting the homogenization of sect and/or ethnicity – is important for improving inter-communal relations and preventing violence.

Communal difference will remain a key feature of political life. Power sharing continues to offer a means of building peace within divided societies, yet its success is contingent upon the participation of external brokers who have the ability to act as spoilers and/or brokers. Moreover, the development and implementation of institutions does not suffice to create a lasting peace; rather, more attention must be paid to inequalities and local developments.

Foreign Relations

Externally, three areas will shape the geopolitical future of the region:

- 1) state fragmentation
- 2) the proliferation of non-state actors (local, national and trans-national)
- 3) greater regional penetration from international actors either directly or indirectly

The failure of Arab leaders to provide for the basic needs of their citizens hallows out the state from the inside and pushes it to the brink of collapse. State borders in the Middle East are unlikely to change over time. However, the outflux of refugees and asylum seekers from the region is sufficient to draw pressure from foreign countries that receive the fleeing multitudes. Liberal democracies will find it in their interest to prevent the disintegration of fragmented states as a mean of preempting a crisis at their doorstep.

As Middle Eastern states struggle to distribute resources and privileges equally, they will inevitably leave gaps that are filled by non-state actors. Regional and international powers that are keen on enlarging their sphere of influence in the region will sponsor these groups in different capacities and for various purposes. What is important to highlight is that in the absence of a system of governance that provides equal political opportunities, local opposition,

whether underground or above ground, will always exist and will draw foreign meddling. Yet, that opposition can be contained by providing lucrative economic opportunities.

The changing dynamics of external engagement with the Middle East can have a dramatic impact on the ways in which regional security is organized while also empowering local groups. Although questions remain about the long-term involvement of the United States, China and other ‘rising powers’, such as India, the Middle East will continue to hold geostrategic significance that attracts foreign intervention.

The position of Iran within regional politics remains a source of consternation for many. As Banafsheh Keynoush argues, Iran will likely continue to project influence across the region by deploying a multifaceted strategy that seeks to make subtle reforms to political order and governance strategies while expanding revolutionary agendas and aspirations.

A major foreign policy issue to watch out for is normalization with Israel. Although a number of Arab states openly started diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv, which is popularly tantamount to treason amongst Arab masses, no major upheaval was recorded as a result of that. While this may encourage other states to follow suit, people’s discontent should not be underestimated. Recent event at Sheikh Jarrah, and the Arab and global solidarity that it garnered, serve as a reminder that the Palestinian question is far from being dead.

The Role of Western Actors

In previous decades, Western foreign policy towards the region has been beset by contradictions, notably a tension over supporting pro-democracy movements or authoritarian allies. As political instability and unrest continues to play out across the region, the treatment of such groups remains – and will continue to be - a source of concern. To counter unrest in Bahrain and other Gulf monarchies, international actors must push for political, legal and security sector reform. This should take the form of broad representation of groups across the political spectrum, the release of political prisoners and the rejuvenation of prohibited political parties. At a time when ruling elites embark on policies to address social and economic inequality, it is imperative that these processes must not exacerbate communal divisions, particularly indigenous and Shi’a groups.

Western involvement is typically viewed with suspicion in the Middle East. Nearly half the people (47%) surveyed in 11 countries in the Middle East were skeptical of Western assistance³. For that to change, the legacy of Western intervention in the affairs of the Middle East must be addressed. Past grievances and support for authoritarian rulers must be acknowledged if trust is to be built. Support for minority groups cannot be demanded at the expense of structural changes. Western actors have a strategic role to play in promoting democratic reforms, but they have to be prepared to accept the results however they come out.

³ <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2021/08/u-s-assistance-to-mena/>

Between Now and Then

The Arab Uprisings stand as a watershed moment in the history of the Middle East. Popular protests across the region left few regimes unscathed. While several regimes were overthrown, others are still struggling to reposition themselves for a new era. The volatile nature of Middle East politics makes it too early to speak of the full aftermath of the Uprisings. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify key areas that will pervade analysis of the Middle East. One such area is citizenship and the prospects of democratization. Military and ruling elites have been blamed for the adverse socioeconomic conditions that are plaguing their states. People have been very frustrated by those conditions and by the ineptitude of their leaders to bring about reforms. People are increasingly prepared to confront the authorities in public and private circles, even in the face of excessive coercion. What this is paving the way for is a new social contract that redefines the relationship between the ruler and ruled. In determining the terms of this contract, democratic practices and freedoms are being negotiated by ruling and opposition forces. In practice, this manifests itself in measures like suspending the constitution, postponing elections, or justifying coups d'état. Keeping an eye on how the power of ruling elites is being contested, and by whom, is an important development to track, and one which will provide insight into the future Middle East.

Another key area to monitor in the upcoming years is the evolution of identity politics. The Middle East is awash with a wide range of transnational ideologies that shape people's expectation of the state and their perception of the other. These ideologies are critical because they challenge the authority, and in some cases the legitimacy, of the modern state. Pan-Islamism in particular was revived in the minds of many Muslims after the emergence of ISIS. While ISIS' operations were neutralized and its infrastructure destroyed, the idea that ISIS encapsulates cannot be said to have been distinguished. It is likely that future Islamic jihadists will call upon their Muslim brothers and sisters around the world to unite under the banner of the Islamic Umma, and erase the artificial state borders that imperial forces drew. That call will inevitably intersect with the pseudo Sunni-Shiite power struggle that has characterized much of the Arab Uprisings. From that perspective, it will be crucial to understand the dynamics of sectarianism and how it relates to regional and international balancing. At the same time, this should be examined against the background of mounting popular pressure for interest-based politics to supplant identity politics.

Finally, developments in the international system are guaranteed to have direct consequences on the affairs and future of the Middle East. Washington's pivot to Asia will cause reverberations across the security architecture in the Middle East. Of particular importance is the ability to (re)implement the nuclear agreement, and Tehran's posture in the region following the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and Iraq. From this, it is pertinent to ask to what extent can the US contain Iran while consolidating its forces to put a check on the growing power of China? Second order consequence of such actions will have an impact on Washington's relations with allies in the Gulf and with Israel. The signing of the Abraham Accords is clear acknowledgement of the need for Gulf states to re-evaluate security provisions.



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On a related note, the military and defense cooperation between Russia and Saudi Arabia offers an indication of how alliances might be shifting in the future. As the West gradually weans itself from dependence on Middle Eastern oil, and China's belt and road initiative covers more territory, the Middle East's geostrategic value appears to be waning. To preempt their demise, countries in the Middle East will race to better position themselves in a sino-centric global market. From that perspective, navigating a bi-polar or multi-polar international system will dictate many of the parameters that govern the future of the Middle East.



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