THE LEVANT

Search for a Regional Order

Mustafa Aydın (Ed.)

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

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Contents

Preface 4
Canan Atılgan

Introduction 6
Mustafa Aydın

Part I: Challenges for and Foundations of a Regional Order

1) Sovereignty Versus Sectarianism: Contested Norms and the Logic of Regional Conflict in the Greater Levant 16
Steven Heydemann and *Emelie Chace-Donahue*

2) Identity Politics and Regional Order in the Levant 48
Kristina Kausch

3) Democratic Transitions in the Levant: Prospects for Restoring a Regional Order 66
Katerina Dalacoure

Part II: Building a Regional Economic Framework

4) Discovery of Energy Reserves in the Levant and Impacts on Regional Security 100
Gareth Winrow

5) Prospects for Economic Integration in the Levant 128
Nader Habibi

6) Challenges of Demographic Pressures and Resource Scarcity for Political Economy in the Levant and MENA Region 156
Özlem Tür

Part III: The New Balance of Power: Key Actors for the Region

7) Levantine Challenges on Turkish Foreign Policy 184
Mustafa Aydın and *Cihan Dizdaroğlu*

8) Understanding Tehran's Long Game in the Levant 214
Sanam Vakil

9) Russian Policy in the Levant 248
Irina Zvyagelskaya

10) US Policies Adrift in a Levant in Turmoil 274
Evrim Görmüş and *Soli Özel*

Preface

Canan Atılgan

The Levant is a plural and heterogeneous region characterized by enormous ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. The rapid developments of recent years have drastically altered the political and economic landscapes of most countries in the region. Transformation processes have been complicated by ethnic conflicts and regional rivalries. Moreover, the region has emerged once again as a central component of not only the strategy of local countries but also of non-neighboring countries. Faced with a myriad of challenges, the (re-)construction of a regional order in the Levant remains a highly complex and difficult proposition, one with, according to many observers, slim chances for success.

At the same time, however, recent developments, such as the discovery of offshore hydrocarbon resources as well as, more broadly, increased economic cooperation are seen by experts as potential harbingers of stabilization and maybe even peace in the long term. In order for this potential to materialize, political animosities between states of the region will have to be overcome and pragmatism be emphasized in relations. Furthermore, external actors should have an interest in fostering stability and cooperation in the region instead of further contributing to imbalance and cleavages since, in the end, allowing for a new regional order to form in the Levant and stabilize the region will also serve to enhance global stability and security.

This volume contains the accounts of the international seminar "The Levant: From Ancient Gateway to Modern Chaos – The Search for a Regional Order", co-organized by the Regional Program South Mediterranean of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the International Relations Council of Turkey from 27-28 April, 2017.

Distinguished academics and experts could be won for this project, which certainly will contribute to a further academic debate on how to create a sustainable order in an extremely turbulent and unstable region, and most importantly, on the essential question of which pillars such an order should be grounded on. The volume contains ten chapters elaborating on the fundamental components of a stable regional order, such as norms, values, institutions and actors. We thank the contributing authors for their devotion to this project. The successful completion of this challenging venture however is thanks to the commitment of Prof. Mustafa Aydin, whose work and expertise have been invaluable.

The conference and the publication are part of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Regional Program South Mediterranean (KAS Poldimed) activities undertaken to promote greater understanding for cross-national and cross-regional developments in the Mediterranean region. KAS Poldimed cooperates closely with local partners in the pursuit of common vision for human development, economic progress, political and social stability. Our commitment to that vision of a more free and prosperous development in the wider Mediterranean will also be a source of inspiration for our activities in the future.

Introduction

Mustafa Aydın

The Levant region — from the French *le Levant* (rising), where the sun rises, referred to since the days of the Cold War as the Eastern Mediterranean — consists of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Cyprus, and parts of Egypt and Turkey. It has historically played an important role as a region, where the East and the West and converge, be it through conflict or dialogue. In modern times though, the individual states that make up the Levant have not been system-determining states in world politics. The Levant as a region has maintained its relevance in international politics due to geostrategic positioning, proximity to Islamic, Christian and Jewish religious sites, and more recently its hydrocarbon resources. Powerful regional actors and their diverse military, political and economic interests, in addition to multitude of ethnicities, faiths, and beliefs as well as continuing interests and interventions of non-regional states, have created numerous fault lines and drivers of conflicts in the region.

Traditionally an area of confrontation between Islam and Christianity, the Levant has seen the addition of a Jewish state into the mix into the 20th century. Yet, throughout its history, the Levant had also been known for its cosmopolitanism as well as its "diversity and flexibility"[1]. It has accommodated different cultures, religions, political inclinations, economic orders, and rulers side by side for centuries, and managed to keep their encounters and divergences confined within the region. The Levant's diversity has become somewhat difficult to contain during the 20th century, however, and the region has seen its quarrels emanate outward from the region to ever-widening circles since the end of the Cold War.

Thus, the outbreak of the Arab Spring in late 2010, with popular uprisings against autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, has ushered an entirely new era with unsettled regional balances, complicated and shifting alliance patterns, fully-fledged sectarian strife, intertwined crises in Iraq and Syria, and the involvement of the United States and the Russian Federation, reminiscence of Cold War confrontations. The combination of these dynamics, together with decaying non-representative regimes, troubled economies infected with corruption and inequality, as well as demographic pressure on resources and the environment continue to threaten stability and prosperity for all.

The widespread breakup of state apparatus, oftentimes termed as state failure, has provoked polarization, sectarianism and occasional civil wars, leading to emergence of powerful non-state actors in the region. Disagreements between the key regional powers, external interventions and shifting alignments between regional and international actors in a multipolar constellation have added new layers to the already complex and unpredictable situation. In this intricate existence, the region needs to find ways to establish a regional order; otherwise the possibility of its final explosion seems imminent. Whether it could reinvent its famed cosmopolitanism of the past is an important query, the result of which is important for not only the well being of its citizenry in the 21st century, but also for the development and realignment of global political forces.

Within this general framework, this collection aims at identifying the various aspects and actors that can influence the formation of a sustainable regional order for the Levant. This includes the dynamics that had created and sustained stability in the region before the 2011 uprising, the foundations for a new regional order, as well as the role regional and

(1) Philip Mansel, The Levant; *Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean*, London, John Murray, 2011, p. 2.

international actors could play in the creation of a sustainable regional order for the Levant. This collection will examine these issues with a view to provide a conceptual framework for further discussion. It is thus designed in three parts: a focus on the challenges for and foundations of a regional order, an assessment for the possibility of a regional economic framework, and an analysis on the impacts of the region's emerging balances.

The first part of the book prepares the ground for further analysis with a focus on challenges for a viable regional order, such as sectarian polarization, state weakness, identity-based politics, and authoritarianism, and its foundations such as sovereignity, stability, inclusiveness, and plurality. The first paper in this section by Steven Heydemann and Emelie Chace-Donahue looks at the contested norms of sovereignity and sectarianism to asses their primacy in a regional security order. They argue that both norms of sovereignity and sectarianism are exploited by regional actors like Iran and Saudi Arabia to overcome their various challenges. They conclude that "neither conception of regional order requires abandoning one set of norms in favor of the other."

The second paper by Kristina Kausch looks into the relationship between identity and order. Although overlapping and multilayered identities have coexisted in the Levant for centuries, the surge of identity politics as a tool of warfare to gain political advantages since the end of the Cold War has caused conflicts. She looks into how the identity based political surge emerged in the region, and how it has been used strategically by interested actors in the region. In the end, she essentially argues that what is prone to cause conflict is not the diversity of identities, but exclusionary identity politics.

The third paper in this section by Katerina Dalacoura looks at the prospects for restoring a regional order with a particular focus on democratization. Even though the authoritarianism in the Levant is normally a *sine qua non* for a regional order, she argues, it is also prone to instability and chaos. Thus, she contends that it is impossible to reach a regional order, or stability, without regional countries adopting a degree of democratization, which she construes with a degree of pluralism, inclusiveness and accountability.

The second section focuses on the economic dimension of a regional order. The papers in this section try to analyze the extent of a possible economic integration or potential for cooperation among regional actors on the security and stability of the region. As the discovery of hydrocarbons in the Levant has changed regional dynamics considerably, it is timely to discuss whether these resources might be a catalyst for regional stability, and in what ways an economic integration may be fostered despite the challenges of demographic pressures, resource scarcity, historical contentions, as well as ideological differences between the key actors.

The first paper in this section by Gareth M. Winrow is designed around the questions of whether the newly found energy resources will create incentives to improve relations among the regional states and to pave the way for regional cooperation, or, whether they will further trigger tensions in the region. While the discovery of energy resources in the Levant Basin Province and surrounding areas in the Eastern Mediterranean shows that there exists a close connection between energy issues and foreign policy interests, Winrow argues that this doesn't mean that energy can bring peace to the region's existing tensions and conflicts. He also contends that there are serious barriers in the way of regional cooperation in the Levant, particularly the prospects for the construction of a gas pipeline from the region to Europe as a result of either its economic and financial feasibility or due to the longstanding regional disputes such as the Cyprus problem or the continuing tension between Turkey and Israel.

The second paper in this section by Nader Habibi looks into the prospects for economic cooperation among the countries in the region. He portrays the period between 2002 and 2010 as the golden era of economic cooperation in the region, primarily led by Turkey, as there was a remarkable economic integration among the Levant countries. However, this cooperation deteriorated after 2011 as a result of Syrian Civil War and changes in the region's balance of power. Even though the prospects for economic cooperation among the regional countries remains uncertain due to ongoing tensions, Habibi claims that it would be more likely to see economic relations develop on a bilateral basis without any multilateral coordination.

The third paper of this section focuses on the usually neglected challenges of the Levant region such as population growth, unemployment, resource scarcity, food security and environmental issues. Although these challenges call for immediate attention and action, Özlem Tür points out the lack of political will in the region for tackling these challenges. She argues that hard security issues overshadow the importance of these enormous challenges, relegating them to a secondary concern, but that they will be extremely important in determining the future of the regimes in the Levant. Thus, she takes up the timely and important question of how unwilling leaders could be persuaded to take immediate and timely action.

The final section of this collection includes four papers dealing with international actors' policies for the Levant. It includes papers that focus the policies of local powers, such as Iran and Turkey as well as global powers, the United States and the Russian Federation. The political developments that took place in the region over the last decade — from the invasion of Iraq to the failure of the Arab-Israeli peace process as well as the recent region-wide turmoil — have seriously affected the regional balance of power. The competition among regional actors has not only increased the instability of the region, but has also triggered the emergence of new challenges to regional order, such as the consolidation of sectarian divergences, the increased role of non-state actors supported by external powers, and the outbreak of new political tensions among regional actors. Moreover, extra-regional powers have been seeking to maintain and/or increase their influence throughout the region via military presence and political alignments. Accordingly, this section seeks to answer the question of how the policies of regional and international actors and their shifting relations shape the region and its increasingly complex balance of power. The papers included in this section are designed to reflect the current balances in the region through policies of both regional and international actors.

Mustafa Aydın and Cihan Dizdaroğlu trace the evolution of Turkish foreign policy toward the Levant since the late 1990s around the major developments such as discovery of hydrocarbons off the coast of Israel, Cyprus and Egypt, the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and changes in the regional balance of power, developments that have paved the way for Turkey's closer engagement with the region. They conclude that, though all these developments have provided space for Turkey to play a more assertive role in the region, it failed to sustain region-wide cooperation and/or carve up an influence zone.

Sanam Vakil examines the increasing influence and interference of Iran, another key actor of the region. She looks into Iran in the Levant through its ties with states and non-state actors, which provide strategic depth and deterrence for Iran. Vakil focuses on Tehran's engagement in the Levant with a historical perspective in order to comprehend its current strategy, which is, according to her, guided by a long-term and diversified foreign policy understanding.

Irina Zvyagelskaya focuses on the policies of the Russian Federation in the region and tries to explain the changing characteristics of its policy toward the Levant by comparing its historical and current approaches through

the prism of two benchmarks: the Syrian Civil War and Palestinian-Israeli conflict. She argues that the active Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War since 2015 has led to the strengthening of Russian presence in the region and the forging of new partnerships there. In terms of Palestinian-Israeli conflict, she claims that Russian policy has been consistent both in form and in content and has tried to contribute to finding a solution to the problem.

In contrast to the Russian policy, the American policy towards the Levant has looked at times incompetent and inconsistent, according to a following paper by Evrim Görmüş and Soli Özel. Mostly analyzing the policies of the last two presidential administration towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and regarding Syria, the authors claim that, with the exception of a consistent pro-Israel bias, the U.S. approach to the region has been marred with inconsistencies. It also looks into how the complex challenges of the Syrian Civil War, with the involvement of Russia and Iran as well as U.S. ineffectiveness, have changed the regional dynamics. Finally, the paper addresses the effect of the rising "regional hegemonic struggle" between Iran and the main U.S. allies in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia, in the post-Islamic State (IS) period and argues that containment of Iran will be the primary objective of the U.S. policy towards the region in near future.

The main common conclusion of this collection of papers is that a structural transformation of the Levant will require a sustainable new order that can guarantee stability and security, and redefine power relations between regional actors and their international backers. However, the main components and variables that constitute and influence the current disorder in the Levant will continue to prevent the emergence of an appropriate framework for a regional order. Thus, the region will continue to be characterized by its current intricate problems and delicate balances in the foreseeable future. Under such conditions, instead of forcing the emergence of a new order, which most probably will not be forthcoming in the short to medium term, it would be better to search for management of differences and conflicting aspects in the short term in order to allow for the development of conditions in the longer term that are more amenable for forging a stable and prosperous regional order, and will most probably be based on the region's historical strengths of diversity, adaptability, and resilience.

I would like to thank the Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) and the International Relations Council of Turkey (IRCT), which co-organized a workshop, titled "The Levant; From Ancient Gateway to Modern Chaos – What Basis for a New Regional Order?", in Dead Sea, Jordan, between 27-28 April 2017 to discuss the ideas and draft papers that found their way into this collection. I am grateful to Canan Atılgan, Director of KAS Regional Program-Political Dialogue-South Mediterranean for her cooperation and perseverance in this project. My thanks also go to Veronika Ertl and Cihan Dizdaroğlu for taking care of the organizational aspects of both the initial workshop and the current volume. Finally, I would like to thank the authors who contributed to this volume for their patience and diligence in going through various versions of their papers.

Hoping to contribute to the understanding of the Levant and its political intricacies, I wish an enjoyable experience to our potential readers in perusing this volume.

Part I

Challenges for and Foundations of a Regional Order

Sovereignty Versus Sectarianism: Contested Norms and the Logic of Regional Conflict in the Greater Levant

Steven Heydemann and Emelie Chace-Donahue

Since 2003, the Middle East has experienced an extended period of political turmoil, violent conflict, mass displacement, external intervention, extremism, and growing polarization among regional adversaries. America's invasion of Iraq in March of that year was the zero moment that set these processes in motion. It transformed Iraq from an adversary to an ally of Iran, enabling Iran's resurgence as a major regional power for the first time since the Iranian revolution in 1979. Iran's ascent sharpened perceptions of insecurity among Arab Gulf monarchies. Popular uprisings that shook the region in 2011 amplified and deepened these trends, further destabilizing a regional security architecture that was already under significant strain. As protest movements morphed into violent conflicts in Syria and Yemen, and with renewed violence in Iraq linked to the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS), Iranian intervention expanded across the Levant and the Arab peninsula, bolstered by the forces of Hezbollah, Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*), and transnational networks of Shi`a mercenaries. Exploiting instability in Syria and Iraq, Kurdish nationalist movements in both countries escalated their efforts to secure greater political independence. Across the Arab east[1], revisionist actors with distinct and often conflicting interests had successfully destabilized a regional balance of power that had previously kept their aspirations in check.

In response to the challenges of popular mobilization and Iranian gains, status quo actors, with their own distinct and often conflicting interests, pursued a dual strategy of counter-revolution and containment. Egypt and Saudi Arabia differed in their views on Syria, Russia, and the threat posed by Iran. Yet they aligned in actively suppressing the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Muslimin*) and other Islamist movements, with Saudi Arabia as perhaps the most determined defender of a pre-2011 regional order that successfully contained both Iran and Sunni Islamist challengers.

As threats from both loomed larger, newly empowered Saudi Crown Prince Muhammed Bin Salman escalated attempts to keep them at bay. Rejecting appeals from the UN, the European Union (EU), and other international actors, Saudi Arabia pressed forward with its military operations in Yemen despite their disastrous humanitarian effects. It also sacrificed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in its determination to suppress the *Ikhwan*. Saudi Arabia, with support from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait, pressured Qatar to break its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and end regional policies it viewed as destabilizing, including support for jihadist elements among Syria's opposition and an accommodationist posture toward Iran. In mid-2017, these Saudi-Qatari tensions led to the splintering of the GCC, with Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies breaking diplomatic relations and imposing sanctions and other punitive measures on Qatar. Punitive diplomacy, however, was only one part of a broader Saudi strategy to preserve the pre-2011 regional balance of power and contain Iranian influence. It intervened militarily in

(1) The term "Arab east" is used here to refer to the Levant states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, but also encompasses the Arab peninsula and Iran. It does not imply that all the inhabitants of this area are Arab.

Bahrain in March 2011, intensified its repression of Saudi Arabia's Shi`a communities, supported elements of the armed opposition in Syria, and cultivated anti-Iranian hardliners within the Trump administration.

Only fifteen years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the century-old state order in the Arab east seemed on the verge of collapse. Indeed, predicting the disintegration of state borders became something of a parlor game, with new imagined maps of how a post-Sykes-Picot Middle East might be organized appearing in several major media outlets.[2] Leading analysts of the Middle East have characterized the region as experiencing a "perfect storm of national and regional instability," or a "new Arab Cold War."[3] Prominent officials, including former diplomats and ministers, routinely describe the Middle East in terms of a "crisis of regional order," the breakdown of states, and even "the collapse of order."[4]

Accounting for Disorder

What explains this dire state of affairs? How did the greater Levant and Arab east reach such a perilous state? Two general explanations have been advanced to account for heightened levels of regional conflict and competition. The first attributes current conditions to the rise of identity

(2) Robin Wright, "Imagining a Remapped Middle East," *New York Times*, 28 September 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/opinion/sunday/imagining-a-remapped-middle-east.html?pagewanted=all

(3) Paul Salem, "Working Toward a Stable Regional Order," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 668 (1) November 2016, pp. 36-52.

(4) Ahmet Davutoglu, "The Crisis of Regional Order in the Gulf." Aljazeera, 27 July 2017. www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/07/crisis-regional-order-gulf-170727173842629.html and Chas. W. Freeman, Jr., "The Collapse of Order in the Middle East." *Middle East Policy* Vol. 21, No 4, Winter 2014, pp. 61–68. Prior to the Arab uprisings, Paul Salem had astutely focused on what he called a broken regional order. See Paul Salem, "The Middle East: Evolution of a Broken Regional Order", Carnegie Papers, No 9, Carnegie Middle East Center, June 2008. www.carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec9_salem_broken_order_final.pdf

politics, specifically, the intensification of sectarian polarization, linked initially to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and then fueled by the Arab uprisings of 2011.[5] This polarization, and the upsurge in transborder, sectarian identity politics that accompanied it, is expressed through a deepening rift between Shi`a and Sunni Muslims, especially but not exclusively in the Arab east. These rising sectarian tensions play out through the escalation of longstanding competition between the Sunni monarchy in Saudi Arabia and the ruling Shi`a clerics in Iran. A "Shi`a revival" post-2003, and Iran's intent to consolidate a "Shi`a crescent" from Tehran to Beirut, have been invoked as the driving forces behind this "new sectarianism"—though skeptics have challenged these claims.[6] Civil wars in Syria and Yemen, as well as Sunni discontent in Iraq, and Shi`a mobilization in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, are cast as both causes and effects of this polarization, both products of and reactions to external intervention by Saudi Arabia or other Sunni regimes, on the one hand, or by Iran or its Shi`a proxies on the other hand.

In this account, regional dynamics are best explained as the expression of identity politics enacted by states that serve as instruments of sectarian regimes. Except in its crudest forms, there is nothing inherently essentialist in attributing regional conflicts to sectarian polarization. Such a view is entirely consistent with an understanding of identity as constructed, and with a nuanced and fluid conception of the ways in which enacting sectarian identities

(5) Daniel Byman, "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East," *Survival* Vol. 56, No. 1 (2014), pp. 79-100.

(6) Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2007; Geneive Abdo, "The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide," The Brookings Institution, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, *Analysis Paper* No 29, April 2013. Skepticism about Iran's intent to establish a Shi`a crescent was widely expressed prior to 2011. See Moshe Ma`oz, "The 'Shi'i Crescent': Myth and Reality," Brookings Institution, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, *Analysis Paper* No 15, November 2007. Since the Arab uprisings and Iran's growing influence in Iraq and Syria, this view of Iran's intentions has

have changed as regimes pursue polarizing strategies to advance their regional interests.[7] Nonetheless, the causal arrow in these accounts flows from regime identities to state policies.

State weakness is the second general explanation that has been offered to account for current levels of regional turmoil and the increasing sectarianization of regional politics. In the words of a leading scholar of Middle East international relations, "[i]t is the weakening of Arab states, more than sectarianism or the rise of Islamist ideologies, that has created the battlefields of the new Middle East cold war. Indeed, it is the arc of state weakness and state failure running from Lebanon through Syria to Iraq that explains the current salience of sectarianism."[8] It should be stressed that claims of state weakness as the cause of the current disorder in the Arab east are quite different from the common, but mistaken, notion that states in the Middle East are artificial because of their arbitrary origins in colonial mapmaking exercises of the early 20th century. It is not Sykes and Picot who are responsible for state weakness in these accounts — though echoes of their meddling are heard in the background.

Claims of state weakness as a cause of sectarianization are not the same as arguments in which current conflicts are seen as harbingers of an imminent cascade of state collapse. Gause, Kamrava, Byman, and others who attribute regional turmoil to state weakness understand that states, as political units, are not going to disappear anytime soon.[9] Rather, it is the state elites who privileged their parochial interests over the hard work of nation building, and indulged in poor governance that excluded and marginalized large segments of their societies, who are principally responsible for state weakness in the greater Levant. Feckless leaders have produced flawed states that exhibit a range of deficiencies. These dysfunctions render states vulnerable to both external pressures and the accumulation of domestic grievances.[10] In other words, the state in the Arab east is "fragile."[11] It lacks effective institutions and suffers from a deficit of legitimacy. State elites rule through modes of governance that exacerbate social cleavages and corrode crosscutting bonds of citizenship. They oversee failed development strategies, and, in many cases, have proven unable to provide citizens with economic security or with social and economic mobility.[12] These deficits have magnified the appeal of sectarian identity politics among disgruntled citizens. In turn, state elites exploit and instrumentalize sectarian identities to mobilize popular support, advance state interests, and undermine regional adversaries.[13]

While arguing for the instrumental use of sectarianism, "weak state" accounts of regional disorder go beyond the realist narrative of scholars like Salloukh,

(7) Fanar Haddad, "'Sectarianism' and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East," *Middle East Journal,* Vol. 71 (3), Summer 2017, pp. 363-382.

(8) F. Gregory Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, No 11, July 2014, p.1, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf Another scholar who views sectarianization as the product of state weakness is Byman, "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East".

(9) Ariel Ahram, "Territory, Sovereignty, and New Statehood in the Middle East and North Africa," *Middle East Journal* Vol. 71 (3), Summer 2017, pp. 345-362; and Ian S. Lustick, "The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political "Backwardness" in Historical Perspective," *International Organization*, Vol. 51 (4), Autumn 1997, pp. 653-683.

(10) Ariel I. Ahram and Ellen Lust, "The Decline and Fall of the Arab State," *Survival*, Vol 58 (2), April–May 2016, pp. 7-34.

(11) The literature on state fragility is voluminous. As useful starting points, see Frances Stewart and Graham Brown, *Fragile States*, CRISE, No 3, June 2010; Lothar Brock, et al., *Fragile States,* New York: Polity Press, 2012; and Robert I. Rotberg, ed., *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

(12) Mehran Kamrava (ed.), *Fragile Politics: Weak States in the Greater Middle East*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016.

(13) Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East," *[R]evolutions; Global Trends and Regional Issues,* Vol. 4 (1), 2016, pp. 120-152.

who has characterized the new Arab Cold War as "a very realist balance of power contest between two states over regional supremacy".[14] From a realist perspective, current conflicts are not the product of socio-economic tensions resulting from poor governance — an argument that views sectarianization as the first resort of weak rulers — but simply the most recent manifestation of the "Arab state system's time-honored geopolitical realities." Riyadh, Salloukh writes, "deployed sectarianism as an instrument of Realpolitik to rally support within the Gulf countries to its foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran."[15] From this vantage point, stateness is not a relevant variable. Whether states are weak or not, they use the instruments at their disposal to advance their interests in anarchic regional and international systems. These differences are not trivial, yet in both variants of state-centered accounts of regional dynamics, the causal arrow flows from states to identities.

Sects, States, and the Myth of Fragility

We view both these arguments as insufficient to explain patterns and trends in regional conflict across the greater Levant and the Arab east. Whether states are instruments of sects or sects the instruments of states is an important distinction. It falls short, however, as a starting point for understanding the underlying logic of regional dynamics in the greater Levant today.

Arguments that treat states as instruments of sects have difficulty in explaining shifts in the intensity and expression of sectarian identities, especially moments in which sectarian polarization ebbs and its weight as a driver of regional dynamics diminishes. They offer little guidance in explaining why regimes that self-identify as sectarian might adopt policies to regulate and prohibit activities that express sectarian solidarities, such as the penalties imposed by Saudi Arabia on young men who leave home to join ISIS.[16] They struggle to account for conflicts within sects, such as the Saudi-UAE campaign to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood, or for evidence of accommodation and cooperation across sectarian lines such as the support of Syrian Sunnis for the regime of Bashar al-Assad. They are also challenged by the simultaneous presence of intense sectarian polarization, which might be expected to sharpen sectarian boundaries, and a counterintuitive flexibility in how the boundaries of sectarian identities are defined. Expanding what it means to be Shi`a, for example, to encompass both the Alawites of Syria and the Zaydis of Yemen, requires no small feat of theological gymnastics.

Arguments that treat sects as instruments of states suffer from a parallel set of weaknesses. Manipulation of sectarian identities and solidarities is an exceptionally blunt instrument. Sectarian identities can readily be invoked as a rationale for state behavior, whether mobilization of the faithful, cross-border intervention, or the use of sectarian norms to discipline or threaten regional competitors. As we have learned at great cost, however, whether in the Balkans, the Horn of Africa, or the Levant, such strategies have lasting and often unintended consequences. Sectarianization is a classic Pandora's Box. It is difficult to manage, target, limit, or reverse. It reshapes patterns of social cohesion, how social norms are applied, and expectations about how sectarian identities are enacted in everyday life. It changes popular expectations about how rulers are expected to behave, creating incentives for autocrats to embrace sectarian strategies to enhance their legitimacy. Left unchecked, it can subsume state-based identities entirely, mocking claims that sectarianization can safely be handled as just another tool of statecraft, or turned on and off like water from a spigot.

(14) Bassel Salloukh, "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East," *The International Spectator*, Vol. 48 (2), 2013, p. 35.

(15) Ibid.

(16) Aljazeera, "Jail for Saudis who join foreign conflicts", 4 February 2014, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/02/jail-terms-saudis-who-join-foreign-fights-20142411202563202.html (Accessed 27 May 2018).

Nor do arguments that view sectarianization as the product of state weakness or "fragility" — the result, Fanar Haddad once asserted, of a "century's worth of failed nation-building" — capture the extent to which the period since 2011 has been marked by ongoing processes of state *strengthening* among a select group of key state actors in the Arab east, along with significant shifts in how regimes are mobilizing and deploying sectarian identities and the ends toward which they do so.[17]

In our account, deepening sectarian polarization and the sectarian idiom in which current regional conflicts play out are the result not of state weakness but of long-term state building processes that have been more effective in achieving their principal purpose — regime security and survival — than advocates of the "weak state" position acknowledge. These patterns of state building, we assert, have enhanced specific forms of state capacity in a number of cases, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar, as well as Egypt and Turkey. First and foremost among these is the development of institutional capacities associated with internal security and the defense of state sovereignty from regional challenges. The authoritarian survivors of the Arab uprisings in the greater Levant are not fragile states. They are "fierce states," and becoming more so.[18] In the process, they are acquiring new capacities and competencies and learning new modes of authoritarian governance to cope with a changing configuration of challenges.

Examples of this trend abound. In mid-2017, Saudi leaders overhauled the security apparatus to establish a new body, the Presidency of State Security. Likened to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security,

(17) Cited in Byman, "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East", p. 85.

(18) Steven Heydemann, "Beyond Fragility: Syria and the Challenges of Reconstruction in Fierce States", Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution, 2018; https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-fragility-syria-and-the-challenges-of-reconstruction-in-fierce-states/ (Accessed August 1, 2018).

this new agency is intended to enhance state capacity to confront security challenges and strengthen the regime's authority to undertake counterterrorism operations.[19] The security overhaul is just one example of a generalized atmosphere in which state security and containment of Iran's threats to sovereignty are driving policy in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia has also pursued crackdowns on dissent,[20] use of counterterrorism laws to prohibit opposition speech,[21] increased civilian surveillance,[22] and ramped up its offensive against the Muslim Brotherhood.

Along similar lines, the UAE has developed its security apparatus through increased attention to cyber security and surveillance. Authorities have allegedly begun to use the state's new cybercrime laws as a legal basis for far-reaching civilian surveillance.[23] The state has also pursued sovereignty protection through suppression of oppositional academics, activists, and religious leaders;[24] and the fierce repression of any activities believed to be associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.[25] Bahrain has sought to shore up its national security by revoking the citizenship of dissenters on

(19) Saudi Arabia Ministry of Interior, "A Number of Royal Orders Issued," 20 July 2017, https://www.moi.gov.sa/wps/portal/!ut/p/z0/fYzNCoJAFIVfxc0s5V6HIWmpYGjtgkDvZhhsyLG8kzVoj5_avs3h_HwcIKiB2EzuZoLzbB5LbminsVKqTJQ8YS4LzLJqf76Uh0LlKRyB_gPLg-vHkTKg1nOwnwD14F10dbNhgavt_GCjbeQgcE0C2c7vn0bm1XZushur10ZLjDGNJSap0ZbheafmC1yOFUU!/ (Accessed 26 May 2018).

(20) "Rights Groups Condemn Saudi Arrests as Crackdown on Dissent," *Reuters*, 15 September 2017.

(21) Patrick Wintour, "UN Accused Saudi Arabia of Using Terror Laws to Suppress Free Speech," *The Guardian*, 4 May 2017.

(22) Glenn Greewald and Murtaza Hussain, "The NSA's New Partner in Spying: Saudi Arabia's Brutal State Police," *The Intercept*, July 2014.

(23) Joe Odell, "Inside the Dark Web of the UAE's Surveillance State," *Middle East Eye*, 27 February 2018.

(24) Amnesty International, "UAE: Ruthless Crackdown on Dissent Exposed 'Ugly Reality' Beneath Façade of Glitz and Glamour," 18 November 2014, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/11/uae-ruthless-crackdown-dissent-exposes-ugly-reality-beneath-fa-ade-glitz-and-glamour/ (Accessed 27 May 2018).

(25) Eric Trager, "The Muslim Brotherhood is the Root of the Qatar Crisis," *The Atlantic*, 2 July 2017.

the grounds of "damage to state security,"[26] cracking down with military force and prosecution on dissenters and individuals it believes are supported by Iran,[27] and allowing military courts to prosecute civilians.[28] In Jordan, we have seen increased security in the form of border protection along the Syria and Iraq borders, and renewed military funding, operational support, and equipment from the U.S.[29] Borders often described as artificial are now the focus of policies aimed at strengthening the Jordanian state's control over its sovereign territory.

These patterns of state strengthening since 2011 amplify the institutional asymmetries that have marked state formation throughout the post-colonial era: Security first, development second. Across the Middle East, they have produced states with the physiognomy of Popeye: Massive security arms on top, a feeble developmental frame below. The only cases in the greater Arab east that deviate from this pattern of state strengthening since 2011 are Iraq, Yemen, and, in part, Syria. Each has become a battleground in which struggles to shape regional order are playing out. In each case, local insurgencies that challenge central authority have become proxy wars for regional balance of power struggles framed along lines we outline below. And in each case, violent conflict has been a leading catalyst of state strengthening in other parts of the region. Yet in their own ways, the experience of each is idiosyncratic, offering relatively little insight into broader patterns of governance and state development in the greater Arab east.

(26) Amnesty International, "Bahrain's Year of Crushing Dissent," 7 September 2017.

(27) Amnesty International, "Bahrain: Government Expels Citizens After Revoking Their Nationality," 31 January 2018.

(28) Katzman Kenneth, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," *CRS Report*, 15 February 2018.

(29) Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "U.S. Delivers Helicopters to Bolster Jordan's Border Defenses," *Reuters*, 28 January 2018.

In Iraq, the weakening of central state authority was the result of the US invasion that first destroyed the regime of Saddam Hussein, and then, against the advice of many in the US government, dismantled state institutions that might have tempered the country's descent into mass violence. In Yemen, as April Alley has argued, President Ali Abdallah Saleh pursued regime security through a strategy that treated state institutions as currency in an ongoing process of bargaining with rivals and allies alike.[30] Saleh deployed state institutions and state resources as instruments of regime maintenance, positioning himself as the pivotal figure in a web of coalitional arrangements that even he struggled to hold together. When he was removed from office in late 2011 through a deal brokered by Saudi Arabia, bargaining over the form and content of the Yemeni state shifted to a National Dialogue Process overseen by external actors. Initially successful, the process was unable to reconcile the competing demands of key actors: the thin, dispersed state Saleh had constructed rested on unstable foundations and could not hold once he was out of the picture.

Does Syria belong in this category of failed or failing states? In our view, it does not. Syria has routinely been described as a failed state since its collapse into conflict in mid-2011. There is certainly no disputing the extent to which the Assad regime's incompetence, dysfunction, brutality, and corruption drove Syrians into the streets in March 2011, sparking one of the most violent and destructive civil wars of modern times. Nor is there much doubt that if state strength is defined according to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, Syria will indeed be categorized as a fragile state. However, if we prioritize regime survival as the principal purpose of the Syrian state, it appears far more resilient and less fragile than its ranking on an index aimed at measuring economic

(30) April Alley, "The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 64 (3), Summer 2010, pp. 385-409.

and social development would indicate. Although our claim might be provocative, and we do not disregard the many dysfunctions it exhibits, the Syrian state cannot readily be defined as weak. After eight years of conflict the Assad regime not only remains in power, buttressed by large-scale external support, it benefits from the loyalty of meaningful segments of Syrian society, continues to regain control over territory lost to the opposition, and has maintained its international standing as representative of the sovereign Syrian state.

The Assad regime has deployed a crude strategy of sectarianization as part of its wartime survival strategy and has seemingly succeeded in doing so — at a horrendous cost. Regional actors intervening in Syria have also made instrumental use of sectarian strategies in their support for the Assad regime.[31] In neither instance, however, do we view sectarianization as an indicator or effect of state weakness. Even while cynically promoting sectarian norms and practices, the Assad regime aggressively asserts its claim as sovereign authority over all of Syria's territory. Russia and Iran both reference their defense of a sovereign government, and the imperative of defending the Syrian state, as justifications for their intervention in Syria. Both have represented themselves as defenders of international law and acted to protect the Assad regime from accountability for its conduct during war. The regime and its allies, as well as Sunni regional actors such as Turkey, have deployed the idiom of sectarianism for instrumental purposes, yet all sides have insisted on the integrity of the Syrian state as a critical condition for the resolution of the conflict. What the behavior of both sets of actors signal, in our view, is the intensity of normative fragmentation in the Middle East, and the extent to which regional conflicts have come to be organized in terms of a clash between norms of sovereignty and norms of sectarianism.

(31) Marc Bennets, "The Kremlin's Holy Warrior," *Foreign Policy*, November 24, 2015. http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/24/the-kremlins-holy-warrior-chaplin-putin-russia-turkey-syria/ (Accessed 25 May 2018).

Contested Norms and the Logics of Regional Conflict

In place of arguments that seek to categorize regional dynamics as structured primarily by *either* identity politics *or* state interest, we claim that current regional dynamics in the greater Levant and Arab east are best explained in terms of competition to determine whether a regional security order will be governed by the norm of sovereignty or the norm of sectarianism. This struggle plays out in an environment of normative fragmentation, where neither norm is hegemonic. It is unfolding most directly through violent confrontations within states that contain multi-confessional societies, and with high levels of cross-border intervention.

As the state order in the Levant came under growing pressure as a result of the 2011 Arab Uprisings, revisionist actors exploited norms of sectarianism to challenge the norm of sovereignty from multiple directions. For some non-state actors, including radical revisionist Islamist movements like ISIS but also more established movements like Hezbollah, the norm of sectarianism offered a chance to break a sovereignty-based regional order dominated by its adversaries. It provided a powerful tool for reshaping regional alliances and overcoming the constraints that had prevented Iran from expanding its regional influence. These threats posed distinct challenges to status quo regional powers who sought both to defend the norm of sovereignty and the state-based regional order that sustained it, and to prevent the expansion of revisionist state actors who sought to remake the regional, state-based balance of power by mobilizing the norm of sectarianism.

As in earlier, largely constructivist, accounts of regime behavior in the Middle East, we thus view norms as having both regulative and constitutive effects.[32] They establish the boundaries of what is considered legitimate behavior by state elites; express criteria against which Arab leaders can be judged, both by their people and by their regional counterparts; provide an idiom in which regional conflicts can be defined; yet also constitute identities by providing incentives for individuals to conduct themselves in a fashion consistent with the expectations associated with a given norm.

As noted above, we trace the origins of this phase of regional competition to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the extent to which it weakened the steady consolidation of the norm of sovereignty that had been underway following the post-1967 decline of transnational pan-Arab ideologies — the previous, if unsuccessful, challenger to the norm of sovereignty as the organizing framework for regional relations. Consistent with the dynamics evident in that era, it is the status quo actors in the greater Levant and Arab east who now act to defend a regional order based on the norm of sovereignty, and revisionist actors — both state-based revisionists like Iran and non-state, revisionist actors, including Hezbollah and ISIS — who exploit the norm of sectarianism to upend this order.

Other parallels to the period in which Arabism and sovereignty clashed in the Middle East are evident in today's regional dynamics, as well. Military strength has become more important in a region riven by multiple violent conflicts, yet it remains the case that power is determined not only by a regime's ability to wage war but its capacity to wield normative influence by positioning itself, simultaneously, as guardian of communal security and as protector of national sovereignty, whether on its own behalf or on behalf of beleaguered allies. Just as regimes during the Arab Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s employed Arabism as an instrument of regional competition while simultaneously, if more quietly, shoring up their standing as sovereign, today's Arab regimes are similarly ambidextrous. Whether they are principally status quo or revisionist actors does not constrain their ability to make use of both normative idioms in their confrontation with regional adversaries. Foolish consistency, as R.W. Emerson wrote, is the hobgoblin of small minds.

Whether revisionist or status quo, regimes exploit both norms of sovereignty and norms of sectarianism, depending on the context. What distinguishes their behavior analytically — and what reveals the coherence underlying hybrid regional strategies — is not whether regimes exploit one set of norms or another, but the intentions and the strategic purposes for which they do so. Both sets of actors make instrumental use of both norms of sovereignty and norms of sectarianism. Except in the millenarian vision of a group like ISIS, they do not represent exclusive or intrinsically contradictory sets of principles or practices. A regional order can include elements of both. Neither is intrinsically associated with either state weakness or state strength. What distinguishes them is the extent to which Sunni actors view the norm of sovereignty as defending their dominance of the existing, post-pan Arab, regional order, and the extent to which Shi`a actors view the norm of sectarianism as central to their revisionist challenge to this Sunni-dominated regional order.

Thus, Saudi Arabia's security and its regional influence are most effectively enhanced in a Sunni-dominated regional order defined by the norm of sovereignty and able to protect regimes against both domestic and external challenges expressed in the idiom of sectarianism. In contrast, in the current regional context, Iran's security and regional influence are most effectively protected by a regional order defined by the norm of sectarianism, which challenges the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia and other Sunni regimes, legitimates its cross-border mobilization of Shi`a identity

(32) Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998.

politics, and justifies its role as advocate and defender of Shi`a, Alawite, and Zaydi communities as well as its use of sectarianization strategies to embolden marginalized Shia` populations within Sunni-led states such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and, to a lesser extent, Kuwait. This understanding of Iran's use of sectarian norms of practices is in keeping with the view expressed by Iran specialist Suzanne Maloney, who anticipated our critique of more recent literature on regional dynamics since 2011. "The literature on Iran," she notes, "typically adopts divergent explanations of [the role of religion in Iran's regional strategy], either dismissing religion as merely a cynical tool for legitimating state interests or, alternatively, interpreting Islamic evangelism and doctrine as the primary determinants of Iran's international agenda."[33] She argues, instead, for a perspective in which sectarian norms and practices express the interplay of national and sectarian identities, both of which are mobilized in pursuit of a revisionist conception of regional order.

Sovereignty versus Sectarianism in the Construction of Regional Order

It is the ongoing Syrian conflict where the struggle between conflicting conceptions of regional order is most acute. It also demonstrates the shortcomings of attempts to explain current regional dynamics as the product of either sectarian identity politics or the instrumental use of sectarianism by weak states. All parties to the conflict have deployed both sectarian and sovereignty-based norms, and have appealed to both sovereignty-based principles of international law and to identity-based appeals to communal security and protection, to legitimate their conduct in one of the most violent civil wars in modern times.

(33) Suzanne Maloney, "Identity and Change in Iran's Foreign Policy", in Shibley Telhami and Michael N. Barnett (eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 89.

The Assad regime now stands as an exemplar of how a brutal authoritarian regime can effectively manipulate its claims to sovereignty to achieve significant advantages over its rivals. The regime has exploited its sovereign standing for a wide range of purposes: to insulate itself from accountability as it engages in a heavily sectarian campaign of violence against its own citizens; to deny legitimacy to opposition groups it derides as lacking any legal basis for their claims to represent the regime's opponents; to legitimate intervention by Russia and Iran, which routinely characterize their presence in Syria — including their reliance on non-state, sectarian armed actors such as Hezbollah and other Shi`a militias — on the grounds that they are lawfully defending a sovereign government; to secure the funds and materiel needed to sustain its war making capacity; to extract resources from international institutions for humanitarian purposes which it then captures and redistributes in support of its military operations; and to deny autonomy of action within areas under its authority to international agencies managing humanitarian programs. At the same time, the Assad regime has, since the very first moments of the Syrian uprising, pursued an explicit strategy of sectarianization. It has demonized its opponents as Islamist extremists and terrorists, while cultivating the most negative, fear-based forms of what Putnam has termed "bonding social capital" among Syria's non-Sunni minorities to bolster their loyalty.[34] Indeed, the regime's reliance on idioms of stateness, sovereignty, and legitimacy to contrast itself with an opposition it casts in starkly pejorative terms underscores the extent to which narratives of sectarianism and sovereignty are mutually constituted, representing elements of a singular discursive repertoire that neatly obscures its internal contradictions.

(34) Robert D Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2000.

The weaving together of this dual narrative — which both revisionist and status-quo actors deploy to advance competing conceptions of regional order — is evident in responses to the rise of the ISIS. The emergence of ISIS as a regional actor in mid-2014, when it surged out of Syria into Iraq, captured the city of Mousul, and established itself as a caliphate, represented a particularly radical expression of the norm of sectarianism.[35] ISIS did not reject sovereignty *per se* (nor, for that matter, has Iran), though it disavowed Westphalian norms of sovereignty enshrined in international law. Instead, ISIS sought to replace a Westphalian understanding with its own jihadist-Salafist conception of sovereignty, based on its particular interpretation of Islamic doctrine. It released statements denouncing the Sykes-Picot agreement as an imperialist imposition, and circulated videos showing ISIS forces bulldozing the border between Syria and Iraq — the first step on the way toward the unification of the Muslim world under the Sunni ISIS caliphate.[36]

ISIS posed an immediate threat to both Saudi Arabia and Iran, which were singled out as targets of harsh sectarian denunciations and threats — Saudi Arabia for having purportedly betrayed Muslims by deviating from the true principles of Islam, and Iran on the grounds of its Shi`a identity.[37]

(35) On ISIS' theory of the state and sovereignty, see issues of *Dabiq*, the English-language magazine ISIS, especially issue no 1 in which ISIS sets out its view of the Caliphate and an Islamic state; http://jihadology.net/2014/07/05/al-ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-magazine-dabiq-1/ (Accessed May 18, 2018).

(36) *Vice News,* "Bulldozing the Border Between Iraq and Syria: The Islamic State (Part 5)", 14 August 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxX_THjtXOw&t=5s (Accessed 27 May 2018). See also Raffaella A. Del Sarto and Aslı S. Okyay, "After Mosul, Are Borders and State Sovereignty Still an Issue in the Middle East?", *OUPBlog*, 17 September 2017, https://blog.oup.com/2017/09/borders-state-sovereignty-middle-east/ (Accessed 27 May 2018).

(37) *Dabiq*, Op Cit. See also Jack Moore, "ISIS Threatens Saudi Arabia with Major Attacks, Says 'We Will Strike You in Your Homes," *Newsweek,* June 9, 2017. http://www.newsweek.com/isis-threatens-saudi-arabia-attacks-says-its-turn-will-come-after-tehran-623715 (Accessed 25 May 2018).

ISIS explicitly challenged Saudi Arabia's claim to the leadership of Muslims worldwide as the guardian of the two holy shrines in Mecca and Medina and deployed sectarian norms and practices to undermine the legitimacy of a regime that was itself deeply associated with sectarian forms of identity politics. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia were victims of terrorist attacks claimed by ISIS.

How the two countries responded to the ISIS threat, however, is quite telling. Iran positioned itself as defender of Shi`a communities threatened by ISIS, and pursued an aggressive strategy of transborder Shi`a mobilization to counter an enemy defined not as a challenge to state order in the Levant but in sectarian terms.[38] Iranian Revolutionary Guard commanders assumed leadership roles in military operations targeting ISIS in Iraq. Iran funded, trained, and equipped non-state Iraqi Shi`a militias, as well as Kurdish Peshmerga forces.[39] Its assertive presence in Iraq made clear Iran's willingness to set aside the conventions associated with norms of sovereignty — which would have required it to subordinate its operations to Iraqi authorities —t o confront an existential sectarian threat through means that advanced its interest in strengthening a transborder sectarian regional order that would both defeat ISIS militarily and challenge its Sunni rivals politically.

In contrast, since 2011 Saudi Arabia has attached increasing weight to Westphalian norms of sovereignty in its response to ISIS. It has both strengthened the institutions tasked with containing domestic challenges and invested heavily in the stability of the state order in the Levant. Saudi Arabia intervened militarily in Bahrain in March 2011 and expanded its economic and strategic support for Jordan. It also joined the US-led Global

(38) William McCants, *ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State,* New York, St. Martin's Press, 2015.

(39) Rebecca Collard, "The Enemy of My Enemy: Iran Arms Kurds in Fight Against ISIS," *Time*, August 27, 2014, http://time.com/3196580/iran-kurds-isis-erbil-iraq/ (Accessed 25 May 2018).

Coalition to Counter ISIS to attack the group's presence in Syria and Iraq. On the domestic front, it has deployed the idiom of state sovereignty and security to pursue a harsh crackdown on its own Shi`a minority — including the execution of a prominent Shi`a cleric — accusing Shi`a nationals of disloyalty to the state and acting as agents of Iran.[40] Saudi authorities also introduced new laws to prevent young Saudis from traveling to join ISIS, formally designated ISIS as a terrorist organization in March 2014, and increased its surveillance of the private banking sector to stop the flow of private funds from Saudi individuals to ISIS.[41] Despite these steps, Western critics of Saudi Arabia continue to accuse it of providing support to ISIS and funding ISIS-affiliated armed groups in Syria.[42] Saudi authorities, however, reject these claims. Evidence of official Saudi funding to ISIS appears scarce.[43] Saudi support for Syria's opposition has largely excluded the most extreme armed groups, and was managed, according to Pierret, with the intent of containing the worst extremes of Sunni sectarianism.[44]

The growing priority that Saudi Arabia now attaches to norms of sovereignty marks a distinct shift from its pre-2011 regional posture. Before the Arab Uprisings, the Kingdom had a long track record as an exporter of sectarianism, in the form of Wahhabist ideology that some

(40) Sam Wilkin, "Saudi Arabia Cuts Ties With Iran as Row Over Cleric's Death Escalates", https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-security-iran-idUSKBN0UH01E20160104 (Accessed 25 May 2018).

(41) US Department of Treasury, "Establishment of the Counter-ISIL Finance Group in Rome, Italy," March 20, 2015. https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl10004.aspx (Accessed 25 May 2018).

(42) For example, see Josh Rogin, "America's Allies Are Funding ISIS," *The Daily Beast*, June 14, 2014. https://www.thedailybeast.com/americas-allies-are-funding-isis (Accessed 25 May 2018).

(43) Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "Saudi Funding of ISIS", *Policy Watch*, No 2275, The Washington Institute, 23 June 2014, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-funding-of-isis (Accessed 27 May 2018).

(44) Thomas Pierret, "The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict," *Peacebrief*, No 162, US Institute of Peace, 18 November 2013, https://www.usip.org/publications/2013/11/reluctant-sectarianism-foreign-states-syrian-conflict (Accessed 27 May 2018).

view as the inspiration for al-Qaeda and ISIS. By most accounts, Saudi authorities believed that by funding Salafist movements abroad it could mollify Islamist hardliners at home. Yet its use of sectarian practices was a response to the specific configuration of threats it encountered at the time, including challenges from secular Arab regimes, the post-1979 consolidation of the Islamic Republic in Iran, and domestic pressure to shore up its Islamist credentials. Even during this period, however, Saudi policy was very explicitly anchored in a status quo commitment to norms of sovereignty. Nonetheless, as the mass protests of 2011 collapsed into violent conflict, as Iran moved to exploit disorder and project its influence regionally by deploying sectarian practices in pursuit of a revisionist conception of regional order, and as ISIS rose up to challenge the state system in the greater Arab east, Saudi Arabia's turn to norms and practices intended to reinforce a state-centric, sovereignty-based conception of regional order represents a rational response to the specific configuration of threats that it currently confronts.

These distinctive ways in which Iran and Saudi Arabia have responded to regional disorder is evident in their reactions to the upcoming parliamentary elections in Iraq. The elections present a clear confrontation between Iran's revisionist sectarian objectives, and Saudi Arabia's status quo commitment to protecting regional sovereignty. Iran has taken an extra-governmental approach to pursuing its objectives in Iraq, working closely with the paramilitary units it funds within the Popular Mobilization Forces (*Hashd al-Shaabi*), to turn military success into political power. Iran has aided these paramilitary groups to transform themselves into political entities, which then went on to significant success in Iraq's May 2018 elections due to popular support for their success over ISIS.[45] Merging paramilitary and political power through

(45) Majidyar, Ahmad, "Iran's Iraqi Militia Allies Eye Next Elections to Consolidate Gains, Expel US," *Middle East Institute*, 20 March 2018, http://www.mei.edu/content/io/irans-iraqi-militia-allies-eye-next-elections-consolidate-gains-expel-us

extra-governmental channels to support Iraq's Shi'a communities, Iran is asserting sectarianism as a cross-border unifier and regional norm. Moreover, it is coopting the norm of sovereignty by seeking to infiltrate the parliament, which has sovereign decision-making power over the prime minster. Saudi Arabia has responded to the threat Iran poses to Iraqi sovereignty by partnering with the Iraqi government to strengthen security and decrease disorder after the fall of ISIS. Saudi and Iraqi leaders signed several agreements in October 2017, with Saudi Arabia agreeing to invest in the reconstruction of cities in the north, as well as other security, development, and trade deals.[46] Saudi Arabia also plans to work with community-based organizations in Iraq to increase food security, access to education, and economic development to prevent extremism. While Iran is acting outside government channels, Saudi Arabia is working with the Iraqi government and local communities to increase security and reinforce state sovereignty.[47]

Conflicts over the norms of sovereignty and sectarianism are also taking place in Gulf countries such as Bahrain. The Al Khalifa regime has repeatedly accused Iran of undermining its sovereignty and destabilizing the country by attempting to mobilize the Shi'a majority against the ruling Sunni minority, and by engaging in terrorist activities within the country.[48] In March 2018, Bahraini security forces arrested 116 people with alleged

(46) Kathem, Mehiyar, "A New Era Beckons for Iraqi-Saudi Relations," *War on the Rocks*, 2 February 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/a-new-era-beckons-for-iraqi-saudi-relations/ (Accessed 27 May 2018).

(47) Ibid.

(48) Ahmad Majidyar, "Manama Says Tehran and its Regional Allies Sponsor 'Terrorist Cells' to Destabilize Bahrain," *Middle East Institute*, 22 January 2018, http://www.mei.edu/content/io/manama-says-tehran-and-its-regional-allies-sponsor-terrorist-cells-destabilize-bahrain (Accessed 27 May 2018).

ties to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.[49] In October 2017 it accused Iran of terrorism for its alleged role in the explosion of an oil pipeline.[50] Bahrain's GCC neighbors have provided economic and political support to the Al Khalifa regime, deeming its economy "too important to fail."[51] The economic and political support is aimed at reducing extremism and increasing the regime's authority, both strategies that Saudi Arabia is also deploying in Iraq to defend the sovereign state system. The Bahraini regime's obsession with countering Iranian influence within the country and the GCC's efforts to save Bahrain's failing economy is indicative of the enduring conflict between sovereignty and sectarianism. As Iranian influence in the Gulf grows, status quo powers are using economic development tools to shore up regime authority and state sovereignty.

From Sovereignty to Sectarianism and Back Again

The extraordinary levels of turmoil and conflict that have engulfed the greater Arab east since 2011 have created an unprecedented opportunity for Iran and other revisionist actors to exploit sectarian norms and practices to mobilize opposition to a state-based regional order that has empowered conservative Sunni regimes. Iran has marshaled identity politics in a bid to reshape the regional balance of power, consolidating a Shi`a counterweight to the influence of Saudi Arabia and its regional partners. It has pursued these ends through a hybrid strategy that

(49) "Bahrain Arrests 116 on Charges of Terrorism, Iran Collusion", *Deutsche Welle*, 3 March 2018, http://www.dw.com/en/bahrain-arrests-116-on-charges-of-terrorism-iran-collusion/a-42814332 (Accessed 27 May 2018).

(50) Reem Shamseddine, "Bahrain Calls Pipeline Blast 'Terrorism' Linked to Iran", *Reuters*, 11 November 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-pipeline/bahrain-calls-pipeline-blast-terrorism-linked-to-iran-idUSKBN1DB0NW (2018).

(51) Luiz Pinto, "Sustaining the GCC Currency Pegs: The Need for Collaboration", *Brookings Doha Center Publications*, 19 February 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/research/sustaining-the-gcc-currency-pegs-the-need-for-collaboration/ (Accessed 27 May 2018).

privileges sectarian norms and practices, yet opportunistically exploits norms of sovereignty. Iran thus works to reinforce norms of sovereignty and enhance state institutions in cases like Iraq and Syria, where Shi`a and other non-Sunni actors control state structures. Simultaneously it deploys norms of sectarianism to empower non-state actors including Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and Houthi militants in Yemen. These groups serve to expand and project Iranian power across state borders to confront Sunni adversaries such as ISIS and Salafist armed groups in Syria, and give Iran the capacity to challenge Saudi influence in places like Yemen and Bahrain.[52] Saudi Arabia for its part works to stabilize a state-based regional order through an equally hybrid strategy, yet one weighted heavily in favor of sovereignty-based norms and practices. To the extent that its defense of a state-based regional order hinges on containing or rolling back Iran and its Shi`a proxies, Saudi tactics will inevitably be inflected by sectarian idioms, and be subject to claims that its policies originate in the sectarian identity of the Saudi regime. Yet its interventions in Syria, inspired in part by an interest in weakening an Iranian client and in part by the aspirational aim of pulling Syria into Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence under a Sunni regime, were animated by an overarching interest in protecting — if not enlarging — a state-led regional order in which norms of sectarianism are subordinate to norms of sovereignty in the management of regional affairs.

Not since the era in which Arabism offered an axis around which challenges to a sovereignty-based regional order could mobilize have states in the region faced challenges on the scale they do today. Environments of normative fragmentation are both cause and effect of heightened competition among actors. They are contexts in which

(52) On Iran's use of state institutions and sectarian norms and practices to advance a revisionist regional order see Ranj Alaaldin, "How Iran Used the Hezbollah Model to Dominate Iraq and Syria", *New York Times*, 30 March 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/30/opinion/iran-hezbollah-iraq-syria.html (Accessed 27 May 2018).

empowered revisionist actors, less constrained by hegemonic norms, can challenge and destabilize an existing status quo. As we've tried to show, however, the appearance of disorder should not obscure the underlying logics that are evident in today's regional conflicts, in which local grievances have become secondary to the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia to define the terms of regional order.

In our view, the prominence of sectarian norms and practices in this struggle is neither the result of state weakness nor the resurgence of atavistic sectarian identities. It is, instead, the aggregate outcome of two distinct causal events in 2003 and 2011 that empowered Iran to mobilize sectarian norms and practices as a powerful idiom to challenge its main regional rival, Saudi Arabia. As it does, Iran also exploits sovereignty-based norms and practices when they serve its larger, revisionist purpose, as in Iraq. In turn, Saudi Arabia has worked to contain Iran by asserting sovereignty-based norms and practices that affirm the integrity of the state-based regional order that emerged following Arabism's decline in the late 1960s. As it does, it deploys sectarian norms and practices when they advance its larger purpose. Neither conception of regional order requires abandoning one set of norms in favor of the other. Yet the contrasts in the underlying conceptions of regional order that animate Iranian-Saudi competition are stark. For the former, regional security and influence increase when regional order is defined principally by sectarian norms and practices; for the latter, regional security and influence increase when regional order is defined principally by sovereignty-based norms and practices.

At present, with the Assad regime's looming victory in Syria and the failure of Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen, Iran and the sectarian norms it champions, appear ascendant. Yet all indications are that norms of sectarianism, like norms of Arabism, will eventually be absorbed into and subordinated to norms of sovereignty. With ISIS defeated militarily, and as violence ebbs in Syria and Iraq, norms of sovereignty are poised

to reassert themselves. As they do, states will unquestionably bear the imprint of current struggles. As Haddad has noted, what it means to enact sectarian identities has undergone meaningful change since 2003, suggesting that recent levels of sectarian polarization will not be short-lived.[53] It also suggests that even as norms of sovereignty reassert themselves, they will do so in ways that accommodate rather than exclude norms of sectarianism, and that accommodate a modified balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well.

Ultimately, however, the conflicts that continue to roil the greater Arab east will not cause the state order to collapse. They are unlikely even to cause significant changes in the internal borders of current states. In a global order structured by norms of sovereignty, and in a region in which sovereignty has become increasingly consolidated over the past fifty years, the possibility that current state borders might be redrawn is remote. [54]The pathway to the reassertion of sovereignty as a hegemonic regional norm will not be smooth. It will not be short. It has already exacted an enormous price from the peoples of the region. For better or worse, however, the logics of regional conflict are pushing the Levant and the greater Arab east toward continuity rather than change in the structure of the regional order.

(53) Haddad, "Sectarianism and Its Discontents".

(54) Nowhere is this more vividly evident than the failed attempt by Iraqi Kurds to secede from the Iraqi state in July 2017. The independence referendum briefly unified an unlikely coalition in defense of Iraq's integrity and sovereignty, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, Russia, Turkey, and the US.

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Identity Politics and Regional Order in the Levant

Kristina Kausch

Sectarianism has become the convenient standard lens to contemplate political tension and conflict across the Middle East. The primary identification with confessional and ethnic affiliations, and their instrumentalisation for specific political agendas has come to underpin and drive conflict across the region. Much ink has been spilled on how sectarianism has been reinforced in the years following the 2011 uprisings to become the main driver of political contestation and power struggles across the region.[1] While few scholars deny that identity-based politics has become deeply engrained in the workings of regional politics in the Levant, views have grown more nuanced in acknowledging that explaining Middle Eastern conflicts from the main vantage point of the Sunni-Shi'a divide fails to capture both the complexities of conflict and the broader motivations of the actors involved. The degree to which sectarianism is rather an object or a tool of conflict, however, remains contested.[2]

The Middle Eastern debate on sectarianism joins the ranks of global debates on political contestation based on community identities. Far from constituting a specific Middle Eastern or Levantine trait, the use of identity-based politics for geopolitical aims is a global trend. Political elites around the world take advantage of the increasing appeal of identity politics with discourses that address specific groups within or across polities, while more inclusive notions of national or supra-national identity struggle to appeal in similar ways.

A host of research has dwelled on whether, to the degree ethno-sectarian identities provide stronger markers of identity than the identification with widely discredited nation states, the legitimacy of state institutions, and the nation-state as such, is up for question. In the Levant, many have wondered whether the post-Ottoman state order, created by the Balfour Declaration in 1917, will survive the advancing ethno-sectarian fragmentation.[3] One hypothesis underpinning many of these analyses has been that varieties of transnational identity politics, purposefully driven by actors interested in fragmentation, are undermining the state order in the Levant.

While the scope of this paper does not allow for a comprehensive assessment of this hypothesis, it will attempt to set the stage by reviewing some of the basic traits of the relationship between identity and order. What role does identity and identity politics play in nation-states and the regional order formed by them? What are the disruptive and uniting qualities of identity, and how are these used strategically by interested actors in the Middle East? What do these dynamics mean for the Levant?

(1) See for example Geneive Abdo, "The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide", *Brookings Institution*, No 29, April 2013. For a more detailed discussion of the sectarianism lens in a specific national context see Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011.

(2) Detailed accounts of the roots of sectarianism in different contexts are contained in the volume edited by Frederic Wehrey, *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East*, London, Hurst Publishers, 2017.

(3) Steven Heydemann, "Syria's Uprising: sectarianism, regionalization, and state order in the Levant", *FRIDE Working Paper*, Madrid, Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior, 2013.

Identity and Identity Politics

Identity defines the individual's belonging to a community. We have multiple overlapping identities: political, geographic, ethnic, religious, sectarian, kinship, etc. The term identity politics — political activism based on group affiliations such as ethnicity, religion, race, sexuality, gender or nationality — was coined in the 1970s and widely spread in the 1980s in response to social injustice, discrimination or assault experienced by members of specific minorities.[4]

A governance entity is built on a community with a shared identity that agrees on the rules on which the community is based. As actors defend or promote a certain order of governance, they define themselves in a particular manner. Modern definitions of statehood emphasize the legitimacy of government institutions as being among the core traits of a state.[5] Legitimacy is linked to state institutions' effective representation of a defined community. Nurturing a clear notion of national identity is therefore a main ingredient of state building.

Actors with a shared identity may however disagree over the norms and order that they associate with that identity. Conflicting or imposed identities, a lack of agreement on the defining identity of a community, or among a community, can lead to conflict over the way the community should be organized and governed. This is especially the case in multi-ethnical and multi-confessional states where sub-national, tribal or religious affiliations and loyalties may take precedence over nationally defined identities. The strengthening of local identities can enhance the difficulties of building a consensus on how a shared state should be designed and governed.[6] The relationship between identity and political order, hence, is highly ambiguous in that identity can be a constituent and disruptive force of order alike.

Traditional notions of identity often part from a static understanding of the term that assumes the need to rank one's individual identities to determine a primordial one. Such one-dimensional conceptions appear increasingly insufficient to explain the complexity of multiple simultaneous identities whose reality is much more malleable and dynamic. Public international law aims to avoid multiple citizenship because of the conflict of loyalty and/or incompatible national legislation that may arise for an individual affiliated with multiple states. By contrast, an alleged conflict between a sectarian affiliation and citizenship is eroded if the underlying motivation to prioritize allegiance with a sectarian community is not primarily religious but based on economic or security considerations, moving the spotlight from issues of faith and identity to governance.

In the Levant, overlapping and layered ethnic, tribal, and confessional identities have coexisted throughout history. The notion that the recent framing of regional conflict along confessional lines will necessarily undermine nation-state based notions of identity belies the multidimensional and malleable character of identity.[7] Ussama Makdisi writes:

(4) Elin Diamond, "Identity politics then and now", *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 37 (1), 2012, pp. 64-67.

(5) *"State fragility and collapse in the Arab region"*, interview with Ezzedine C. Fishere, Yale MacMillan Center, Council on Middle East Studies, 5 April 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUz0Aqr-3EY (Accessed 30 January 2018).

(6) Amal Treacher, "Edward Said: Identity, Politics and History". *Psychodynamic Practice,* Vol. 11 (4), 2005, pp. 372-378.

(7) See also Steven Heydemann, *Syria's Uprising: sectarianism, regionalisation, and state order in the Levant*, Madrid, FRIDE Working Paper, 2013.

> Communal identities…have always represented dynamic and highly contextual understandings of self and other. They have been driven by innumerable schisms, and have also undergone repeated redefinitions throughout their long histories. Thus, the invocation of sectarianism as a category of analysis for understanding the Middle East…conflates a religious identification with a political one, and it ignores the kinship, class, and national and regional networks within which sectarian self-expression has invariably been enmeshed.[8]

The malleable nature of identity stands in contrast with the way identity politics – in the Middle East and beyond — has defined individual belonging in increasingly narrow and exclusionary ways.

The surge of identity politics as a result of popular discontent with institutions is a global trend. Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the main trait of modernity is the fragility and temporariness, or fluidity, of its forms of life.[9] Bauman's theory applies at multiple levels, from individual jobs and relationships to the way nations deal with each other. In this increasingly fluid world, governments and individuals alike struggle to reduce complexity and adapt their toolboxes and priorities to the requirements of a qualitatively changing global order. Bauman explains:

> It is (…) patterns, codes and rules to which one could conform, which one could select as stable orientation points and by which one could subsequently let oneself be guided, that are nowadays increasingly short supply. It does not mean that our contemporaries are guided solely by their own imagination and resolve and are free to construct their mode of life from scratch and at will, or that they are no longer dependent on society for the building materials and design blueprints. But it does mean that we are presently moving from the era of pre-allocated 'reference groups' into the epoch of 'universal comparison', (…) These days patterns and configurations are no longer 'given', let alone 'self-evident'; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another's commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers.[10]

The insecurity that comes with the erosion of traditional forms of life and order favors the global surge of identity politics as individuals seek orientation by clinging to increasingly rigid identity labels. While there is little new about the human search for identity, today this search takes place in a different social context. Since the end of ideological bipolarity three decades ago, identity politics has replaced ideology as a powerful driver of political mobilization. An increasingly narrow conception of identity, and responsiveness to exclusive identity politics, has been acknowledged as a key factor in processes of radicalization.[11] As Kenan Malik observes pointedly, "racist populism and radical Islamism are both, in their different ways, expressions of social disengagement in an era of identity politics".[12]

The surge of rigid, exclusionary narrow-scope allegiances over weakening notions of broader, more inclusive identities makes identity politics a promising tool for groups with specific political agendas to advance their

(8) Ussama Makdisi, *The Mythology of the Sectarian Middle East*, James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy Research Paper, Houston, Rice University, 2017.

(9) Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000, pp.1-16 and 168-202.

(10) Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 7.

(11) Tufyal Chowdhury, *The Role of Muslim Identity Politics in Radicalisation*, Study commissioned by the UK Department for Communities and Local Government, London, Communities and Local Government Publications, 2007.

(12) Kenan Malik, "A search for identity draws jihadis to the horrors of Isis", *The Guardian*, 1 March 2015.

cause via polarization, often in opposition to or circumvention of the state and its institutions. Separatists, ethno-nationalists, right-wing populists, religious extremists, but also entrenched elites, strategically draw on identity politics to frame a cause likely to mobilize people in line with their vested interests. In societies from the United States and Europe to the Middle East, these identity-based narratives are able to thrive in political and ideological vacuums that are left by disillusionment with public institutions, weak political leadership and a (real or perceived) lack of accountability.

The Exploitation of Diversity in the Levant

In the Levant, the institutional and security vacuum in the Middle East since the 2011 uprisings created inroads for external players to advance their geopolitical agendas under an all-encompassing sectarian narrative. Sectarianism tends to fracture societies internally, posing a threat to the cohesion of the nation-state and the peaceful coexistence of its citizens.

The surge of sectarian identity politics in the region is commonly ascribed to four broad, interconnected elements: the weakness of Arab nation-states; pre-existing ethno-sectarian divides; the power vacuums that arose in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and, more forcefully, following the 2011 uprisings; and the efforts of regional and extra-regional players to strike geopolitical advantage of these conditions.

During the 1950s and 1960s, most Arab states were institutionally and ideologically weak and loyalty to the state was challenged by sub-national and supra-national identities, most notably Arab nationalism. Gause sustains that the decline of the transnational ideological power of Arab nationalism was flanked by a period of consolidation of Arab states in the 1970s and 1980s which, albeit by authoritarian and oppressive means, were ultimately effective in controlling their societies. Following from this, he argues that the rise of sectarian conflict in the region was largely a result of the weakening of these state-building projects over the past two decades.[13] Aaron Miller stresses that despite the popular cliché of Arab states as 'tribes with flags' (coined by Egyptian diplomat Tahseen Bashir), "respect for borders in this part of the world has proven pretty resilient".[14]

Ultimately, the 2011 uprisings have provided ample evidence of the poor governance for any conception of state weakness. The uprisings were above all rooted in a demand for public legitimacy and accountability. They have made clear how authoritarian Arab states, long viewed stable for their capacity and durability, ultimately collapsed over their failure to gather the popular legitimacy needed to build and consolidate citizens' identification with the nation and its institutions. Scholars have stressed how state institutions that lack accountability and fail to provide effective services and security leave voids in which non-state spoilers thrive.[15]

Next to weak governance, the deterioration of state-citizen relations rests on Arab states' relatively fading value as a source of identity. Where sources of higher authority such as nationalist notions are losing ground, alternative identities tied to sub- or transnational identities are on the rise, further eroding the legitimacy of the state.[16] Arguably, eroding legitimacy can make state institutions more vulnerable to non-state challengers. Given that non-state communities often lack the capacities and reach of

(13) F. Gregory III Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle Eastern Cold War", *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper,* No 11, July 2014, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf

(14) Aaron David Miller, "Tribes with Flags", *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2013.

(15) See for example Francis Fukuyama, "The Imperative of State-Building", *Journal of Democracy,* Vol. 15 (2), 2004; Keith Krause and Jennifer Milliken, "State-Failure, State Collapse and State Reconstruction: Concepts, Lessons and Strategies", *Development and Change,* Vol. 33 (5), November 2002, pp. 753–774.

(16) See also Bassam Tibi on the "simultaneity of structural globalization and cultural fragmentation", in Bassam Tibi (ed.), *Islam in Global Politics: Conflict and cross-civilizational bridging,* London, Routledge, 2012.

states to tackle transnational security challenges, their ability to replace the state is limited. Most non-state challengers, therefore, contest not the concept of statehood in itself, but the state's institutional design and performance.[17]

The example of post-2003 Iraq shows how sectarianism can flourish as a result of state weakness and power vacuums, paired with misled external intervention.[18] The collapse of the Iraqi state shifted the long-crumbling authoritarian stability of Arab states toward sectarian fracture. Having been utilized by Saddam Hussein in his reliance on tribal and sectarian loyalty to back up his fragile rule, the collapse of the Iraqi state soon brought Kurdish and sectarian identities to the forefront of the eventual power struggle. Iraqi consociationalism was implemented after 2003 as a means of creating fully inclusive power structures for the new, fragile Iraqi state. By institutionalizing power structures along ethnic and confessional lines, however, Iran and its Iraqi proxies were given ample opportunity to define Iraqi politics along communal lines. These arrangements also allowed the Kurds to carve out an ethnic quasi- state in the North, thereby ensuring the entrenchment of sectarianism in Iraqi politics and, by extension, a lasting Iranian influence in Iraq.[19]

One of the most consequential case studies of identity politics in the Levant has been the rise and fall of the Islamic State (IS). Terrorism expert Marc Sageman has noted how IS has been "using religion to advance a political vision, rather than using politics to advance a religious vision", and that religion "plays a role not as a driver of behavior but as a vehicle

(17) Florence Gaub, "State Vacuums and Non-state Actors in the Middle East and North Africa", in Lorenzo Kamel (ed.), *The Frailty of Authority: Borders, Non-State Actors and Power Vacuums in a Changing Middle East*, Rome, Edizioni Nueva Cultura, 2017, pp. 51-64.

(18) Sir John Jenkins, "States and Non-states: The Levant in Turmoil", *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 47 (2), 2016, pp.199-214.

(19) Ibid.

for outrage and, crucially, a marker of identity."[20] In picturing the *Umma* as a global political community, prospective recruits are allured by the idea of being "members and defenders of the ultimate in-group."[21] Here, too, the example of Iraq provides lessons of how a collapsed state unable to provide security to its citizens drove people to seek protection from armed sections of their sectarian groups. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State were able to take advantage of this securitization of sectarianism. Ultimately, the invasion of Iraq created the environment for Al-Qaeda to regain its stature.[22]

Next to state weakness and power vacuums, the recent surge of sectarianism as a main marker of political identity has been portrayed by some as a natural consequence of ancient ethnic and sectarian fault lines somehow etched in the Middle Eastern DNA. In 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama erroneously claimed in his State of the Union speech that "the only organizing principles [in the region] are sectarian" and that the roots of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East "date back millennia."[23] A cultural relativist logic of blaming current conflict on alleged historical fault lines can also be found in claims that the 2011 uprisings resuscitated centuries-old sectarian conflicts that had been temporarily set aside when the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement saw France and Britain draw national boundaries across the lines of ethno-sectarian communities. Although ethno-sectarian diversity of course played a significant role throughout the history of the Levant, the historical record does not support the portrayal of these diversities as an inevitable fault line of conflict. In the

(20) Marc Sageman, quoted in Mehdi Hasan, "How Islamic is the Islamic State?", *New Statesman*, 10 March 2015.

(21) Jenkins, "States and Non-states", pp. 199-214.

(22) Marc Lynch, "Sectarian Dangers in the Middle East: A Conversation with Raymond Hinnebusch", *POMEPS Middle East Politics Podcast*, Project on Middle East Political Science, 2017, https://soundcloud.com/pomeps-245027518/ray-hinnebusch (Accessed 28 February 2018).

(23) Karla Adam, "Obama ridiculed for saying conflicts in the Middle East 'date back Millennia'", *Washington Post*, 13 January 2016.

Middle East and elsewhere, religious communities have fought each other for centuries just as they have often coexisted peacefully. And even where sectarian conflict emerged, its intensity and sources have varied considerably.[24]

Sectarianism as the main narrative of regional conflict emerged following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and only became fully entrenched via the political vacuum and ensuing geopolitical competition dynamics in the aftermath of the 2011 popular uprisings. The major determinant of conflict over the past decades has not been the Levant's substantial ethno-sectarian diversity, but the political exploitation of such diversity for political and economic gain.[25]

Institutionalized sectarianism has been present in Lebanon since the 19th century and sectarianism has been widely instrumentalized over the past decades. For example, sectarianism has been used as a means to access resources via clientelist networks, or as a way for regimes to create trusted core groups.[26] Bassel Salloukh shows how Levantine sectarianism has emerged over decades by a mix of structural and power-related factors that have come to feed a clientelist network along sectarian lines that is now difficult to undo.[27] Makdisi points out how these clientelist sectarian structures have been flanked by an empty anti-sectarian rhetoric to prop up the public diplomacy arsenal of corrupt, anti-democratic political elites in the Middle East, that have come to evoke the threat of sectarianism to selectively denounce violence and discrimination in service of their individual agenda.[28]

(24) Daniel Byman, "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East", *Survival*, Vol. 56 (No 1) February-March 2014, pp. 79-100.

(25) Bassel Salloukh, "How to break the Middle East's Sectarian Spiral", *Washington Post*, 8 August 2016.

(26) Lynch, "Sectarian Dangers in the Middle East".

(27) Bassel Salloukh, "Sect Supreme", *Foreign Affairs*, 14 July 2014.

(28) Makdisi, "The Mythology of the Sectarian Middle East", p. 6.

Lebanon, long considered an outlier in the Arab world with its highly institutionalized political structures along sectarian lines, risks to become an inspiration to other countries in the region as societies struggle to deal with increasing sectarian polarization. But Lebanon also holds a key lesson for the region: When sectarian, tribal or ethnic divisions are considered the primordial parameters of society, an institutionalization of these identities via a power-sharing pact becomes the only way to solve conflict. While such pacts may help the cause of peace in the short term, ironically, they perpetuate sectarian fault lines in the society, facilitating the narrative of sectarian fault lines as an ancient cultural feature and enhancing the prospects of future conflict. In addition to state weakness and sectarian non-state actors thriving in the power vacuums left by state collapse, sectarianism has risen as a result of the geopolitical contest among regional and international actors, which will be dealt with in the following section.

The Sectarianization of Geopolitical Contest

Hashemi and Postel have coined the term "sectarianization" as "a process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity markers."[29] They underline the instrumentalization of sectarian identities to gain or maintain political power, and pointedly add: "To paraphrase the famous Clausewitz aphorism about war as a continuation of politics by other means, sectarian conflict in the Middle East today is the perpetuation of political rule by via identity mobilization."[30]

(29) Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, "The Sectarianization Thesis", in Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (eds.): *Sectarianization; Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017.

(30) Ibid, p. 5.

Just like multiple political actors have done on the national and sub-national levels, leaders across and beyond the Middle East have taken ample advantage of the opportunities provided by the surge of identity politics, using it as a tool of hybrid warfare in larger geopolitical power struggles. The result has been a sectarianization of regional geopolitical contest. Those who can claim and steer identity politics are one step ahead.

Reasons for external interference in the Levant abound as the future of Syria, and the Levant more broadly, directly affects the core strategic interests of every major regional and global player. The fact that alliances have come to be formed along shared geopolitical interest and regime affinities just as much as along sectarian lines supports the view that the emerging conflict scenario in the region is primarily driven by dynamics of classical geopolitical competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their respective allies. Despite concerns about sectarian divisions in their own societies, regional actors utilize sectarian identity politics for political mobilization abroad.[31] External actors´ arming of sectarian communities friendly to their strategic aims might in many instances have tipped the balance from non-sectarian towards sectarian conflict.

The crossing of sectarian boundaries in Middle Eastern alliances (such as Tehran's close relations with Hamas) speaks to how regional powers are primarily motivated by their geopolitical interests. Such a development demonstrates the global trend towards pragmatic issue-based alliances of international actors with parties that they otherwise would have little in common with. In fact, the fluid nature of alliances strengthens the link between geopolitical and sectarian motivations. The

(31) F. Gregory Gause, "Ideologies, alliances and underbalancing in the new Middle East Cold War", Memo for the Symposium 'International Relations and A New Middle East', *Project on Middle East Political Science*, 2015, https://pomeps.org/2015/08/26/ideologies-alliances-and-underbalancing-in-the-new-middle-east-cold-war/ (Accessed 26 February 2018).

increasing unpredictability of long-standing alliances has contributed to the escalation of the Saudi-Iranian confrontation by heightening Saudi Arabia's sense of vulnerability against a surge from an increasingly assertive Iran. In addition, the record of shifting Middle Eastern alliances over the past few years shows how alliances are highly vulnerable to changes in their members' domestic politics, especially if they involve power shifts from one ethnic or sectarian group to another.[32]

The sectarianization of geopolitical contest has been facilitated by alliances between regional or global powers and non-state actors in which material empowerment is traded for local influence. In an effort to exploit the opportunities left in the wake of the 2011 uprisings, ambitious regional powers sought alliances with non-state actors pursuing sectarian agendas who had filled power vacuums left by deposed regimes. These alliances between local non-state actors and their external sponsors framed conflict more and more along ethno-sectarian lines. In the identity-driven regional conflict scenario, a regional actors' influence came to depend largely on his capacity to engage and co-opt influential proxy agents across the region.[33]

Examples such as Iran's relation with Hezbollah, Qatar's patronage of the Muslim Brotherhood and Russian and US support to the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds illustrate how states' proxy warfare and the increasing influence of non-state actors can erode statehood and regional order. Moreover, as local and transnational identities gain in importance over nationalist notions, states may turn to non-state actors to draw legitimacy from their religious, sectarian, ideological or tribal affiliations. Affinities between patron and client based on kinship, ideology and/or religion have been key to establishing and sustaining the relationship. Both Iran and Saudi

(32) Eduard Soler i Lecha, "Liquid Alliances in the Middle East", Barcelona, CIDOB, December 2017.

(33) Gause, "Ideologies, alliances and underbalancing".

Arabia have used sectarian proxies to legitimize and support their regional power competition, guided by the formation of a sectarianism-led axis.[34]

Conclusion

A look at the linkages between identity and order show clearly how identity politics are often instrumentalized for political gain. Contrary to widespread belief, it is not so much the diversity of identities itself, but the use of exclusionary identity politics that so often motivates conflict. It follows that public debates vastly over-emphasize the substance of specific identities, to the detriment of a broader debate on constructive forms of identity politics. Radicalization is not primarily about religion; sectarian proxy warfare is not primarily about doctrinal differences. Political strategy, in turn, should focus less on the substance of sects, religion or ethnicity, but on the larger appeal of identity politics.

Whether the sectarianisation of Middle Eastern politics and conflict can be reversed will depend on undoing the main factors that brought it about. To the degree that sectarianism is a result of the competitive interference by external powers instrumentalising sectarianism, a withdrawal of external forces from domestic conflict, especially an end to the practice of arming sectarian groups, might help to de-escalate conflicts, although it could also likely tip the balance towards unfriendly conflict parties. To the degree sectarianization is a response to the security dilemma — people feeling a lack of order and an inability to seek security from any party besides their sectarian groups — the focus on ceasefires and the establishment of a balance of power between regime and opposition might eventually open a space for moderate voices and de-polarization.[35]

(34) See also Kristina Kausch, "State and Non-State Alliances in the Middle East", *The International Spectator*, Vol 52 (3), 2017, pp. 36-47.

(35) Lynch, "Sectarian Dangers in the Middle East".

Importantly, the trend towards sectarian politics in the Levant has also been met with resistance and backlash from increasingly vocal groups and movements, such as the *Beirut Madinati*. These groups explicitly oppose the framing of politics along sectarian lines and seek to reframe political debates along the inclusive shared interests of all citizens. In the Levant, the existence of multiple identities contrasts with the salience of sectarianism and risks that a whole generation will develop that defines itself only, or predominantly, in sectarian terms. The explicit fostering of the notion of multiple identities (Syrian, Arab, Sufi etc.) during a coming period of reconstruction will therefore be key.

The policy challenge for political actors in the age of identity politics more broadly is to reinforce the constituent dimension of identity, build inclusive identity narratives, and use identity politics as glue between communities, instead of as a disruptor. Identity politics works only in an exclusionary way if identities are presented as mutually exclusive. A constructive and inclusive brand of identity politics would need to forge a more malleable delineation of identity as a flexible, dynamic choice.

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Democratic Transitions in the Levant: Prospects for Restoring a Regional Order

Katerina Dalacoura

Introduction

The modern period, and particularly after the emergence of the state-system in the early part of the twentieth century, has undermined the unity of "the Levant." The region consists of very disparate polities; there are few similarities between the political systems of the countries that comprise it, namely Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey[1] and Cyprus. When it comes to social make-up and ideological orientation, the differences are equally or even more profound. Long-standing and seemingly intractable conflicts — between Israel and the Palestinians and between Turkey and Cyprus — permeate the Levant and constitute some of its seemingly permanent fractures. More recently, broader Middle Eastern confrontations have also had an impact on the Levant: the geopolitical clash between the Iran-led and Saudi-led camps, the ideological conflict between Muslim Brotherhood groups in various countries and their opponents, as well as the struggles between Islamists and secularists. The internal fragmentation of the Levant renders it vulnerable not only to these wider Middle Eastern confrontations but also to intervention, either directly or by proxy, by global actors such as the United States, Russia, or European states.

(1) Only Turkey's southern regions are conventionally considered part of the Levant. Turkey is treated in Chapter 7 of this volume as an intervening regional actor and will therefore not constitute a focus of the present chapter.

The 2011 Arab uprisings exacerbated conflict and turmoil in the Levant, with the civil war in Syria constituting the dominant event in the region since that point in time and drawing the surrounding countries into its destructive vortex. The changes wrought by the uprisings have now intermingled with the pre-existing conflicts in the Levant and with new local and pan-Middle Eastern confrontations in pernicious ways. These developments, taken together, have seemed to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the state boundaries that have defined the region over the past one hundred years or so.[2] It is, therefore, not really convincing to speak of an order prevailing in the Levant, either in the period before 2011 or, even less so, since then. If anything, we can refer to stability or, more accurately, a degree of immobility prevailing between the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990 and the Arab uprisings of 2011. Although even that had been punctured by armed conflicts between Israel and Hizbullah in 2006 and between Israel and Hamas in 2008, the Levant collapsed into a veritable disorder by 2011.[3]

I argue that the Levant will not overcome this disorder and regain a degree of order — in the sense either of stability or of recognized rules governing relations between regional actors — unless the states comprising it undergo a degree of democratization. Democracy is closely linked to the emergence of peace and security but is also a condition for them to endure. This may seem uncontroversial but, in fact, the opposing point of view has prevailed thus far in large parts of the Levant; that

(2) Martin Beck, Dietrich Jung, and Peter Seeberg, "Introduction", in Martin Beck, Dietrich Jung and Peter Seeberg (eds.), The Levant in Turmoil: Syria, Palestine, and the Transformation of Middle Eastern Politics, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 1-13.

(3) There is a long-standing debate in International Relations on the concept of order, international and regional. I will not engage with these theoretical concerns in the present paper but see, for example, Hedley Bull, The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics, London, Macmillan, 1977; Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzalez-Pelaez (eds.), International Society and the Middle East: English School Theory at the Regional Level, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2009.

authoritarianism, not democracy, is a *sine qua non* for a regional order, or stability. However, what we have seen — most spectacularly in Syria — is that authoritarianism, by undermining society's capacity to negotiate conflict peacefully, leads to instability and chaos.

In this paper, I do not take democratization to mean the emergence of full-blown democratic systems. Rather, I interpret it as entailing a degree of pluralism, inclusiveness and accountability that allows for peaceful coexistence in domestic society and an adequate functioning of a given political system. I see democratization as being dependent on a degree of political elite consensus or intra-elite consensus on the creation of reasonably well-operating institutions that allow for a measure of civil society participation (loosely defined) to counter-balance top-heavy regimes, all in the context of a collective commitment to the broader national good.[4] The last point is important because, despite the frequent emphasis on the fragility and artificial nature of the system of states in the Levant, there are no alternatives to it (a point poignantly illustrated both by the rise and the demise of the so-called Islamic State or *Daesh*). The challenges to the existing borders in the Levant come from the Palestinian and the Kurdish national movements, both of which seek national self-determination and the establishment of new states.

(4) The Lebanese system (variously described as confessional, sectarian or consociational) arguably offers a possible model for democratization. However, despite the fact that such a system allows for the existence of some political space (and, as such, can allow for a degree of liberal politics), it also renders society prone to fragmentation and – particularly in a region such as the Levant – vulnerable to outside intervention. Furthermore, it is not conducive to democratization and liberalization within the distinct communities that comprise the political system.

Discrete Political Trajectories in a Fragmented Region

The polities comprising the Levant are disparate and find themselves at different points in the evolution of their political systems with regards to democratization. Cyprus has been partitioned since the Turkish intervention of 1974 but is nevertheless a mature democracy and member of the European Union; it will therefore not be included in the following discussion. Turkey will also be excluded for the reasons outlined above.

When looking at potential democratic transitions in the Levant, it is possible to distinguish loosely between two clusters of states. On one hand are Syria and Egypt, states that experienced major changes in 2011 but are currently witnessing, albeit for different reasons and in different ways, a rapid return to authoritarianism. A second group of countries – Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Palestine – did not undergo major upheavals in 2011 but have experienced strains as an indirect result of the uprisings and their reverberations both in the Levant and in the wider Middle East.[5] The six countries are examined, one by one, below.

Egypt

The protesters in Tahrir Square were not raising many placards with the word "democracy" but they did demand freedom, dignity and, indirectly, accountability, representation and good governance – some of the

(5) Katerina Dalacoura, "The 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East: political change and geopolitical implications", International Affairs, Vol. 88 (1), 2012, pp. 63-79. Katerina Dalacoura, "The Arab Uprisings Two Years On: Ideology, Sectarianism and the Changing Balance of Power in the Middle East", Insight Turkey, Vol. 15 (1), 2013, pp. 75-89.

constituent parts of a democratic system.[6] The anti-corruption discourse that permeated the rebellion was closely linked to the demand for social justice, a response to the perceived growing inequality in the Egyptian economy and society writ large, but also to the lack of democratic governance.[7]

The overthrow of the authoritarian regime of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 appeared to bode well for democratization in Egypt, but two pre-existing problems contributed to undermining its prospects. The first was that Mubarak was removed with the connivance of the Egyptian military after it recognized the unsustainability of his regime.[8] This led to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) taking control of the levers of power from February 2011 to June 2012, which prepared the ground for the military's return to power in July 2013. The second problem was that popular mobilization in 2011, tremendous though it was, took place in a de-politicized context that was characterized by a weak civil society.[9]

Although some analysts would dispute this assessment – pointing to movements such as "6 April" and "We are all Khaled Said", as well as the labour protests that had gained momentum in the years prior to the rebellion – it remains true that Egyptian civil society was unable to organize to offer a counter-weight to the counter-revolutionary forces that

(6) Kamal E. O. Salih, "The Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings," Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. 35 (2), 2013, pp. 184-206. Jean-Pierre Filiu, The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising, London, Hurst, 2011; Bassam, Haddad et al, The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: End of an Old Order? London, Pluto, 2012.

(7) International Crisis Group, Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East: Egypt Victorious?, Report No 101, Cairo and Brussels, International Crisis Group, 24 February 2011; Marc Lynch, The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East, New York, Public Affairs, 2012.

(8) Dalacoura, "The 2011 uprisings", p. 70.

(9) Joel Beinin, "Civil Society, Ngos, and Egypt's 2011 Popular Uprising", South Atlantic Quarterly, Vol.113 (2), 2014, pp. 396-406.

emerged after 2011.[10] The same can be said about Egyptian opposition parties, with the exception of the Islamists.

The superior organizational capacity and the implicit message that, as "good Muslims", they would be able to deliver on the social justice demands which had underpinned the uprising,[11] opened the way to electoral success for the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafi Islamist groups such as al-Noor. Together these parties secured approximately seventy-five percent of the vote in a string of parliamentary elections from late 2011 to early 2012.[12] Muhammad Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader, was elected president of the Republic in June 2012.[13]

The de-legitimation of the FJP was rapid during its one year in power (June 2012-July 2013),[14] but the fact that it was overthrown by a military coup has undercut the prospects of democracy in Egypt (however popular this coup may have been among large segments of the Egyptian citizenry). President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who led the coup, was elected to the

(10) Dalacoura, "The 2011 uprisings", p. 68.

(11) Carrie R. Wickham, The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2013; Khalil al-Anani, Inside the Muslim Brotherhood: Religion, Identity, and Politics, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016; Tarek Masoud, Counting Islam: Religion, Class, and Elections in Egypt, New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

(12) BBC, "Egypt's Islamist parties win elections to parliament", 21 January 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16665748 (Accessed 2 February 2018).

(13) For example, in November 2012, thousands of protesters gathered in Tahrir Square to protest Morsi's decision to grant himself sweeping powers to oversee country's transition. See David D. Kirkpatrick, "Named Egypt's Winner, Islamist Makes History", 24 June 2012, The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/world/middleeast/mohamed-morsi-of-muslim-brotherhood-declared-as-egypts-president.html?mtrref=www.google.co.uk&gwh=316F4E3AB874CF0195A2660AEB7EC117&gwt=pay (Accessed 2 February 2018).

(14) David D. Kirkpatrick and Mayy El Sheikh, "Citing Deadlock, Egypt's Leader Seizes New Power and Plans Mubarak Retrial", The New York Times, 22 November 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/23/world/middleeast/egypts-president-morsi-gives-himself-new-powers.html?_r=0 (Accessed 2 February 2018).

presidency by a huge percentage (claimed to be over 90 per cent) in May 2014, yet he is presiding over a repressive and increasingly authoritarian government that has outlawed the Brotherhood and increasingly incarcerated political opponents, whether they be secular or Islamist or from the right or left. The government has also stifled civil society: the NGO law of 2016[15] is more restrictive than any such laws Mubarak had installed and NGOs are further undermined by a discourse which depicts them as "foreign agents".[16] New legislation on public protest, on terrorism, and on the military courts has wreaked havoc on civil freedoms and the press and social media are increasingly muzzled. Parliament has been emasculated, extra-judicial killings abound, torture is rife, and the number of political prisoners runs into the tens of thousands. Some secular political parties have been co-opted by the regime, as they fear it less than they fear the Islamists, and now operate in a tightly controlled game.[17] The political space between the regime and the Islamist opposition – the latter not being paragons of democracy either – has shrunk. The only shoots for a possible return to democracy can be found in single-issue organizations, professional and trade union associations, and among some leftist and liberal activists who are resisting regime co-optation – but are themselves fairly weak. The hopeful days of 2011 have passed and Egypt appears to have come full circle as the country experiences a greater level of oppression than it did under Mubarak.

(15) The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Egypt NGO law: UN expert warns about growing restrictions on civil society", 11 October 2016, http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20665&LangID=E (Accessed 31 January 2018).

(16) Khaled Dawoud, "Understanding the Dangers of Egypt's NGO Law", Atlantic Council, 7 December 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/understanding-the-dangers-of-egypt-s-ngo-law (Accessed 1 February 2018).

(17) Michele Dunne and Amr Hamzawy, "Egypt's Secular Political Parties: A Struggle for Identity and Independence", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 March 2017, http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/31/egypt-s-secular-political-parties-struggle-for-identity-and-independence-pub-68482 (Accessed 20 November 2017).

Syria

The Syrian revolt began in March 2011 with similar demands to those in Egypt: the desire for dignity, accountability and social justice.[18] However, the regime's violent response to the protests, just as they began to spread, further fuelled the confrontation, which quickly degenerated into violent conflict. Whereas the regime was "unitary and cohesive", the society was "heterogeneous and, to some degree, divided" since the regime had worked hard for decades to "bolster unity at the top", binding the army and security services to it and forging networks of capital, while at the same time exacerbating the divisions of "sect and ethnicity, class or region" within the society.[19] The al-Assad family and its clique ruled the country through fear and patronage, forming alliances of convenience with various segments of the Syrian population. In such a setting, civil society was unable to develop in any significant way, despite the heroic struggles and sacrifices of some individuals and groups, particularly in the years immediately before 2011. As a result, the knives were out very quickly in 2011, undercutting the possibility of a peaceful resolution.

The al-Assad regime held together to a large extent because it had the backing of the army, which did not fracture, as well as support from a number of sections of Syrian society, not least the Christian and Alawite minorities fearful of being targeted by the Sunni majority, which was seen

(18) For background analysis of the cause of the revolt, involving the regime's changing economic policies and the configuration of their social base, see Hinnebusch, Raymond, Syria – Iraq Relations: State Construction and Deconstruction and the MENA States System, LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series No 4, London, London School of Economics, 2014, pp. 20-21.

(19) Bassam Haddad, "The Syrian Regime's Business Backbone", Middle East Report, No 262, 2012, p. 26.

as the backbone of the revolt.[20] The regime has also formed a tacit alliance with the Syrian Kurdish minority; the latter has fought Daesh, a radical Islamist formation that emerged in Syria in 2014. The opposition to al-Assad has been comprised of radical groups such as *Daesh* and affiliates of al-Qaeda, moderate Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood,[21] and secular groups. It has been divided along ethnic lines (Kurdish versus Arab[22]), ideological lines (various hues of Islamists[23] and groups from the right and left of Syrian society) and sectarian lines (between Sunnis and those fearful of Sunni domination). Paramilitary organizations "of all ideological stripes and political allegiances" have sprung up among the Kurdish, Sunni, Druze and Christian communities.[24] Regional powers, such as the Gulf States and Turkey, and jihadist groups, have "hijacked" the original movement inside Syria and exacerbated divisions.[25]

The combined effects of the profoundly authoritarian nature of Syria's politics and the internecine carnage that has unfolded since 2011 undermine the prospects for democratic transition in the country. Syria has a very weak democratic legacy to draw on in the first place. Elections have traditionally been used as instruments of regime legitimation

(20) See e.g., Nicholas Frankovich, "Deposing Assad Could Hurt Syria's Christians", National Review, 23 June 2017, http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/448912/syrian-civil-war-assad-christians-oppose-efforts-depose-him (Accessed 31 January 2018). The picture is not always clear regarding whether Syrian Alawites support the al-Assad regime. See Caroline Wyatt, "Syrian Alawites distance themselves from Assad", BBC, 3 April 2016, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35941679 (Accessed 31 January 2018).

(21) Yehuda U. Blanga, "The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian Civil War", Middle East Policy, Vol. 23 (3), 2017, pp. 48-69.

(22) Numerous others, e.g. Turkmen, who started getting organized after the uprising, supported by Turkey. See unpublished paper by Funda Karadeniz, "Turkey and Turkmens in 'New Middle East Cold War': A View from the Kin-State", 3rd Middle East Congress on Politics and Society, Sakarya University, 11-13 October 2016.

(23) International Crisis Group, Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition, Middle East Report No 131, Damascus and Brussels, International Crisis Group, 12 October 2012.

(24) Omar Dahi, "Some Days Before the Day After", Middle East Report, No 274, 2015, p. 18.

(25) Ibid.

and conduits of patronage, with parliament being effectively a sham institution. This has continued in a different way since the eruption of the civil war. The elections of 2014 that "confirmed" al-Assad's presidency as well as the elections held in April 2016 in government-held areas[26] showed that elections had now become an instrument of war for the regime. Having said that, the country will not be able to move into any semblance of normality or peace without a degree of democratization, broadly conceived. This may be helped by the fact that, paradoxically, the war has opened up some space for popular mobilization, in the form of hundreds of local councils, as Syrians have had to organize themselves to survive.[27] That the route to peace goes through democratization is recognized in the UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which called for peace in 2015 and asserted the need for "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance" and "free and fair elections."[28] The various formal and/or informal attempts at conflict resolution that have taken place in Istanbul, Geneva, Astana, and elsewhere also demonstrate that democratic processes will be a driver of any sustained peace.

The underlying question here is whether democratization will take place within the pre-existing boundaries of the country, in other words, without the country fragmenting. The likelihood of the country fracturing by formal secession is thin, at least in the short to medium term. What may

(26) John Davison and Laila Bassam, "Assad Holds Parliamentary Election as Syrian Peace Talks Resume", Reuters, 13 April 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/assad-holds-parliamentary-election-as-syrian-peace-talks-resume-idUSKCN0XA2C5 (Accessed 22 November 2017).

(27) Ghias Aljundi, Local Governance Inside Syria: Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations, London, The Hague, and Washington, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2014, https://iwpr.net/sites/default/files/download/publication/iwpr_syria_local_councils_report_web.pdf (Accessed 31 January 2018).

(28) United Nations, Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks, SC/12171, New York, United Nations, 18 December 2015, https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm (Accessed 23 November 2017).

well happen, however, is that distinct territories become autonomous and, to all intents and purposes, self-governing. This is effectively already occurring in parts of northern Syria controlled by Kurdish forces in the territory called the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria or Rojava ("west" in Kurdish).[29] It also happened in the territories governed by *Daesh*,[30] which filled a void, though this is now dissipating. For some, such autonomization of parts of Syria offers the only realistic prospect for the country to hold together in future and thus should be formalized in new constitutional arrangements. There are two options here, either a federal system or a confessional system of the Lebanese variety. Neither of them will work, in my view. It is difficult for the former to be implemented without a measure of ethnic cleansing to create homogenous populations in given territories; this has already happened but could accelerate if formalized in a peace agreement. A confessional system would also prevent democratization internally in each community and, more importantly, render Syria continuously vulnerable to intervention from outside forces intent on supporting their ethnic affiliate, co-religionist or political ally on the ground, thereby encouraging instability in the long term. This has been the predicament of Lebanon.

(29) Mireille Court and Chris Den Hond, "Experiment in Self-rule in Rojava", Le Monde Diplomatique, 5 September 2017, https://mondediplo.com/2017/09/05rojava (Accessed 23 November 2017).

(30) Peter Harling, "Islamic State Fills Middle East Void: IS Back in Business", Le Monde Diplomatique, 28 August 2014, https://mondediplo.com/2014/09/04islamicstate (Accessed 24 November 2017); Charles C. Caris and Samuel Reynolds, ISIS Governance in Syria, Middle East Security Report 22, Washington, DC, Institute for the Study of War, 2014; Mara Revkin and William McCants, "Experts weigh in: Is ISIS good at governing?", Brookings Institution, 20 November 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/11/20/experts-weigh-in-is-isis-good-at-governing/ (Accessed 22 November 2017).

Lebanon

Lebanon's political system, variously described as confessional, sectarian or consociational, functions on the basis of pre-agreed institutional arrangements and a division of power between the country's eighteen recognized religious and ethnic communities. Political positions and segments of the state are split along community lines and each community has a degree of autonomy in its internal affairs, specifically in education and family law.[31] One of the consequences of the system — in place since Lebanon's creation in the 1930s and reaffirmed by the Taif Accords of 1989 which ended the Lebanese civil war[32] — is the weakness of the Lebanese state, in terms of the coercive mechanisms at the state's disposal, such as the army, intelligence services and police. The state's lack of coercive power, however, has opened up a degree of political space, particularly in the areas of free speech and civic freedoms, which have left Lebanon, in some ways, a freer country than other Middle Eastern states that have suffered from the heavy hand of the state.[33] As a result, civil society in Lebanon is vibrant.[34] A negative aspect of the system, however, is that each community continues to be hierarchically ordered internally, and socially conservative attitudes endure even within the civil society organizations. Lebanon's confessional system also leaves the country vulnerable to foreign intervention, as individual communities become proxies for outside powers, perpetuating political fragmentation.[35]

(31) Carol Hakim, The Origins of the Lebanese National Idea (1840-1920), Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013; Reinoud Leenders, Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State-Building in Postwar Lebanon, London, Cornell University Press, 2012.

(32) Lebanese Presidency, "The National Accord Document – The Taef Agreement", 4 November 1989, http://www.presidency.gov.lb/Arabic/LebaneseSystem/Documents/TaefAgreementEn.pdf

(33) Michael Young, "The Lebanon Exception", Carnegie Middle East Center, 19 July 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/71565 (Accessed 23 November 2017).

(34) Civil Society Facility South, "Mapping Civil Society Organizations in Lebanon", 2015, http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/lebanon/documents/news/20150416_2_en.pdf

(35) Beverley Milton-Edwards and Peter Hinchcliffe, Conflicts in the Middle East since 1945 (3rd ed.), London and New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 60-74.

The Taif Accords of 1989 signalled a new phase in Lebanese politics, one that became increasingly marked, however, by an emasculation of democratic institutions, such as they were. Under the over-lordship of Syria, which for all intents and purposes controlled the country after the end of the civil war, the sectarian division of power continued albeit with a modified balance between the communities reflecting the weakened position of the Maronite Christians at the end of the war. The politics of Lebanon came to be dominated by the powerful Shia sectarian militia Hizbullah, which became almost a "state within a state", enjoying Iranian support and leading the "resistance" against Israel.[36] The departure of Syria from Lebanon following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005 did not significantly alter Hizbullah's position. Horse-trading and an often muscular manner of negotiation continued to characterize Lebanese politics, resulting sometimes in long periods of instability or a vacuum of power at the top. The political stalemate between the Hizbullah-centred March 9 coalition and the Sunni and Saad Hariri-centred March 14 coalition caused growing paralysis, especially after Hizbullah gained veto powers on government policy in May 2008.[37] Hizbullah's strategy toward Lebanese state institutions has been "to fill them, keep them empty or render them unworkable"; a strategy intended to create a vacuum within these institutions with a view to neutralizing opposition.[38]

The 2011 rebellions did not directly affect this state of affairs, given the absence of significant unrest in Lebanon, which saw only a few relatively small protests calling for political reform. The rebellions would have a

(36) Katerina Dalacoura, Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East, New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 81-93.

(37) Tim Butcher, "Hizbollah's Lebanon veto power boosts Iran's Middle East influence", The Telegraph, 21 May 2008, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2001235/Hizbollahs-Lebanon-veto-power-boosts-Irans-Middle-East-influence.html (Accessed 3 February 2018).

(38) For a vivid example of the situation in 2014, see David Gardner, "Lebanon on the Brink", Financial Times, 16 May 2014, https://www.ft.com/content/66d483fe-dbbd-11e3-b112-00144feabdc0 (Accessed 24 November 2017).

profound indirect effect on Lebanon, however, as the civil war unfolding in neighbouring Syria caused a flood of refugees to stream towards the country (an approximate 1 to 1.5 million coming into a country of 6 million). Providing for such a number of refugees has put an enormous strain on the country's resources.[39] It has also led some of Lebanon's Sunni minorities to turn to extremism, mirroring to an extent the situation in Syria and in particular the rise of *Daesh* as well as the al-Qaeda-linked *Jabhat al-Nusra* — renamed *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* in July 2016 after severing links with al Qaeda — and to the spill-over of violence from Syria into Lebanon. It also sparked off tension between Sunni extremists and Hizbullah (tit-for-tat bombings, kidnappings and beheadings),[40] deepening division and suspicion between Lebanese communities and damaging the prospect of re-establishing working political processes.

The second indirect way in which the Syrian civil war has impacted domestic Lebanese politics is through the changing position of Hizbullah as a result of its active military involvement in Syria on the side of the al-Assad regime and in alliance with Iran. Since 2011, Hizbullah has been fighting on the side of the Bashar al-Assad regime, in tandem with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's loyal forces, the al-Quds Brigade of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, led by General Qasem Soleimani. Its involvement in Syria has made it "turn eastwards", away from Lebanon and towards Syria.[41]

A deepening Middle East-wide confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia (with Qatar and Turkey caught in the middle) took hold alongside the unfolding Syrian Civil War. This confrontation would play out to a

(39) UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response, Lebanon Country Profile", 30 June 2017, http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122 (Accessed 23 November 2017).

(40) International Crisis Group, Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria, Middle East Report No 153, Brussels, International Crisis Group, 27 May 2014, p. 8.

(41) Ibid.

degree inside Lebanon. In November 2016, Michel Aoun, one of the Maronite leaders with a close relationship with Hizbullah, acceded to the Lebanese presidency which had remained vacant for over twenty-nine months.[42] This was pleasing to Hizbullah and Iran, who may have long recognized that the former cannot take over Lebanon completely but wished that it did sufficiently to serve their interests. But Saudi Arabia has contested this state of affairs, using its relationship with the Sunni family of Saad Hariri, over which it holds extensive power. This took a dramatic turn in November 2017, with Saudi displeasure at what they saw as Hariri's acquiescence to Hizbullah, flaring up into his forced resignation from the prime-ministership.[43] Lebanon is being torn asunder by the regional Iran-Saudi confrontation, with negative implications for the restoration of functioning domestic political processes, let alone its democratic processes.

Jordan

Jordan's internal politics were also affected indirectly by the 2011 uprisings, albeit in different ways than were seen in Lebanon. The diverse political systems in Lebanon and Jordan are one explanation for why the countries were affected differently by the uprisings. Jordan is a monarchy and the king rules over a semi-authoritarian political system and a stratified society.[44] Despite a series of partial democratic openings during the 1990s, Jordanian Parliament remains weak. Political parties and members of parliament tend to identify and align themselves through patronage rather than ideology, with independent "tribal" members forming the majority in that body. The Muslim Brotherhood and its political party, the Islamic Action Front, have constituted a long-standing and, in some ways, loyal opposition, being able to elect some of their candidates into parliament. However, they are no paragons of democracy themselves, as their political ideology remains profoundly conservative despite a democratic patina.[45] Freedom of expression and other civil freedoms tend to be restricted, and civil society is weak. Many of the Jordanian "NGOs" are sponsored by the regime and others subsist through foreign lifelines while others tend to be linked to the Islamic movement, broadly conceived.[46]

Protests in Jordan in 2011 were not nearly as extensive as in Egypt, Syria or elsewhere in the Arab world but they did alarm the regime. The king dismissed the unpopular government of Samir Rifai in February of that year and instructed its replacement to carry out reforms; a series of constitutional amendments followed, strengthening judicial authorities and political and civil rights.[47] These changes were limited, however, and did not substantially dent the hold of the monarchy on the political process; the king still appoints the prime minister and the cabinet.[48] The regime was particularly alarmed by what appeared to be

(42) David Gardner, "Lebanese Pluck Leader Michel Aoun from Pages of Nation's History", Financial Times, 2 November 2016, https://www.ft.com/content/988c5958-a05a-11e6-86d5-4e36b35c3550 (Accessed 24 November 2017).

(43) Tamara Qiblawi and Hamdi Alkhshali, "Lebanese PM held 'captive' in Saudi, president says", CNN, 15 November 2017, https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/15/middleeast/lebanon-saudi-arabia-hariri-aoun/index.html (Accessed 1 February 2018).

(44) Amr Hamzawy and Nathan J. Brown, "A Boon or a Bane for Democracy?", Journal of Democracy, Vol. 19 (3), 2008, p. 49-54.

(45) European Union Election Observation Mission, "The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Parliamentary Election 20 September 2016 Final Report", 20 September 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_eom_jordan_2016_final_report_eng.pdf (Accessed 31 January 2018).

(46) Heba W. AlNasser, "New Social Enterprises in Jordan Redefining the Meaning of Civil Society", September 2016, Chatham House, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-09-28-jordan-civil-society-al-nasser-final.pdf (Accessed 31 January 2018).

(47) Marwan Muasher, "Jordan's Proposed Constitutional Amendments – A First Step in the Right Direction", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 August 2011, http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/08/17/jordan-s-proposed-constitutional-amendments-first-step-in-right-direction-pub-45366 (Accessed 24 November 2017).

(48) "The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Constitutional Amendments of 2011", International Labour Organization, http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=91041 (Accessed 14 May 2018).

rumblings of dissatisfaction among its traditional supporters, the so-called "East Jordanians" (as opposed to the Jordanians of Palestinian origin who constitute the majority of the population). Elections took place in January 2013 but the Islamic Action Front boycotted them (as it had the 2010 elections).[49] The September 2016 elections saw the Brotherhood abandon its boycott and win a modest plurality; but, again, within a very fragmented parliament and within very restricted political parameters.[50] Six years later, it appears that the events of 2011 have not really changed the basic contours of internal Jordanian politics — although it may be said that they have inspired some of the youth to try to dislodge existing structures, particularly in the context of civil society.[51]

The second way in which the 2011 uprisings impacted Jordan was through the Syrian crisis. The country has been severely affected by the influx of refugees from Syria. Although this has energized civil society in some ways (even though it is international NGOs and international organizations which carry the heaviest load), the refugee crisis has stretched Jordan's meagre resources to the limit and has caused internal political stresses and strains. Note, however, that according to some analysts, the refugees are helping shore up the regime, by allowing it to blame pre-existing problems with the economy and resources on the refugees.[52] Jordan's politics may not yet be in crisis, but the stagnation that characterizes its political system does not bode well for the prospects of Jordan taking meaningful steps towards democratization.

(49) Richard Spencer, "Jordan election boycotted by Islamists", The Telegraph, 23 January 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/jordan/9822070/Jordan-election-boycotted-by-Islamists.html (Accessed 31 January 2018).

(50) Kirk H. Sowell, "Takeaways from Jordan's Elections", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 September 2016, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64749 (Accessed 24 November 2017).

(51) AlNasser, "New Social Enterprises in Jordan".

(52) Simone Hüser, "The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Its Impact on Jordan: In Reference to the Regime's Structural Deficits", in Beck, Jung and Seeberg (eds.) The Levant in Turmoil, pp. 79-99.

Israel

Israel is a mature democracy with full institutional checks and balances in place for the protection of the rule of law and the respect of civil liberties. Civil society is vibrant and active. The problem with Israeli democracy, however, is that the Palestinian minority does not enjoy the same rights as the Jewish majority. Furthermore, continuing Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Golan Heights, as well as the blockade of Gaza, have pernicious effects on democratic culture and institutions in Israel as a whole.[53]

Israel did not totally escape the turmoil that swept through the Middle East in 2011 as small social protests took place in the country during the summer of that year. These protests were mostly driven by socio-economic grievances and declining living standards. However, they were minor and did not lead to substantial political change: The Likud-led coalition government of Benjamin Netanyahu, which had come to power in 2009, had its mandate renewed after elections held in 2013 and 2015.[54] The Netanyahu government is part and parcel of the rightward trend of Israeli politics over the past decade, which has occurred within both the secular and the religious segments of society.[55] Nationalist and religious

(53) In this section, I will not be discussing the Palestinian minority in Israel separately. For background reading on this minority, see Gideon Doron, "Two Civil Societies and One State: Jews and Arabs in the State of Israel" in Augustus R. Norton (ed.) Civil Society in the Middle East, Vol. 2, Leiden, Brill, 1996, pp. 193-220; and Yakub Halabi, "Democracy, Clan Politics and Weak Governance: The Case of the Arab Municipalities in Israel", Israel Studies, Vol. 19 (1), 2014, pp. 98-125.

(54) Jodi Rudoren, "Netanyahu Soundly Defeats Chief Rival in Israeli Elections", The New York Times, 17 March 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/18/world/middleeast/israel-election-netanyahu-herzog.html?mtrref=www.google.co.uk&assetType=nyt_now (Accessed 31 January 2018); Yehuda Ben Meir, "Israel: the 2015 elections", The Institute for National Security Studies, 29 March 2015, http://www.inss.org.il/publication/israel-the-2015-elections/ (Accessed 1 February 2018).

(55) Guy Ben-Borat, "Religion, Secularization and Liberal Democracy in Israel", Mediterranean Politics, Vol. 18 (2), 2013, pp. 242-258.

parties have become prominent partners in Netanyahu's three coalition governments. Naftali Bennett's *Habayit Hayehudi* (Jewish Home), a right leaning, religious, Zionist, and pro-settlement party, represents "the return of the national religious camp to mainstream Israel over the past 10 years".[56] Avigdor Lieberman heads *Yisrael Beytenu* (Israel is Our Home), an ultra-nationalist, secularist and anti-Arab party.[57] The ultra-orthodox SHAS party also continues to play an important role in Israeli politics.

Although a two-state solution is still the preference of the majority,[58] Israel's shift to the right is connected, either as cause or effect, to the fact that the country has failed to take meaningful steps towards achieving it.[59] Half of Israeli Jews think that Arabs (the Palestinian minority) should be expelled or transferred from Israel; a plurality of Israeli Jews (42 percent) believe settlements on the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem improve the security of Israel, while 30 percent disagree and 25

(56) Natan Sachs, "Religious Politics at a Crossroads in Israel", Brookings Institution, 9 October 2013, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/religious-politics-at-a-crossroads-in-israel/ (Accessed 29 November 2017).

(57) Ishaan Tharoor, "A Guide to the Political Parties Battling for Israel's Future", The Washington Post, 14 March 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/03/13/these-are-the-political-parties-battling-for-israels-future/?utm_term=.c7fb91a579e2 (Accessed 29 November 2017).

(58) Mazal Mualem, "Israelis Support Netanyahu, but also Two-state Solution", Al Monitor, 30 May 2017, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/israel-palestinians-two-state-solution-benjamin-netanyahu.html (Accessed 28 November 2017); "Palestinian-Israeli Pulse: A Join Poll", Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 25 January 2018 http://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Summary_%20English_Joint%20PAL-ISR%20Poll%204Jan2018.pdf (Accessed 14 May 2018).

(59) The Economist, "The Evolution of Israeli Politics", The Economist, 15 March 2015, http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/03/economist-explains-11 (Accessed 29 November 2017). See also "Politics in Israel is Increasingly Nationalist", The Economist, 20 May 2017, https://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21722031-israels-politicians-promote-religion-and-intolerance-politics-israel-increasingly (Accessed 31 January 2018).

percent believe that settlements have no impact on Israeli security.[60] The occupation of the West Bank is deepening, in line with the objectives of the religious right, and in particular, Naftali Bennett (though this does not mean that Bennett's "annexationism" has become the dominant position in the country).

The bigger issue here is Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land and in particular its settlement policy in the West Bank, which should belong to a future Palestinian state. Israeli democracy will remain flawed as long as the country continues to act as an occupier thanks to the "fatally corrosive effect the suppression of Palestine has on Israeli society".[61] In circular fashion, this corrosion reduces the prospect of resolution of Israel's conflicts with the Palestinians. Support for settlements in the West Bank has grown in Israel among the secular segments of society as well as the religious ones that have traditionally favoured them.[62]

Palestine

The West Bank and Gaza Strip are run by the Palestinian Authority (PA), led by Al-Fatah, and Hamas respectively, though one must immediately qualify this by saying that their control is very limited. The Palestinian Authority has limited jurisdiction over some areas of the West Bank, which, along with East Jerusalem, remains in many other ways under Israeli occupation. Hamas does control Gaza internally but the borders of the territory are closed and policed by Israel. This unique governance

(60) "Israel's Religiously Divided Society", Pew Research Center Polling and Analysis, 8 March 2016, http://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/08/israels-religiously-divided-society/ (Accessed 24 November 2017).

(61) Shlomo Ben Ami, "Israel at a Crossroads", The Cairo Review of Global Affairs, No 27, 2017, https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/israel-at-a-crossroads/ (Accessed 28 November 2017).

(62) Callie Maidhof, "Settlement Secularism", Middle East Report, No 269, 2013, pp. 30-34.

situation, together with various factors internal to Palestinian society, has thwarted the development of democratic processes and institutions, though the causes of this phenomenon are also to be found in factors internal to Palestinian society and resulting from Palestinian political choices.[63]

The territorial split between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas is one of the outcomes of the parliamentary elections of January 2006, which Hamas won.[64] The crisis that ensued after the elections led to the withdrawal of Hamas to Gaza in 2007. Since that time, only local elections have taken place in Palestine. When the PA organized the last of these local elections in May 2017, they were not held in Gaza as a result of Hamas's non-participation. This decision was made on the rationale that national reconciliation between the PA and Hamas should be a precondition for any election.[65] Various attempts at reconciliation have indeed occurred; the most recent one in October 2017, which appears to have some potential of enduring and ending the rift in the Palestinian national movement.[66]

There was no political uprising in Palestine in 2011 but it was also indirectly affected by the events of that year through the implosion of Syria. The outbreak of the civil war precipitated Hamas's departure from the Syrian and Iranian orbit — Hamas leader Khaled Mishaal had left Damascus by January 2012[67] — although there has since been a partial restoration of relations. The situation between Israel and Hamas remains fraught, with occasional flare-ups of military conflict in the past few years. For example, clashes erupted between the two parties in November 2012, in July-August 2014, and again in April 2018.[68] Israel-Hamas relations have also been indirectly shaped by the consequences of the Egyptian uprising: Hamas lost a valuable ally with the overthrow of the Morsi government and gained an unsympathetic neighbour when the al-Sisi government came to power.

The resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a return to the peace process depends on the existence of a degree of democratic accountability within the whole of Palestine. The process cannot proceed without Palestinian national unity; and, for peace to hold, the Palestinian people in their entirety must be "carried" by their leadership towards a deal. This requires a degree of engagement on the part of the Palestinian citizenry as well as accountable and open governance by the Palestinian leadership. It is in this broad sense that the resolution of the most long-standing and intractable conflict in the Levant, and the restoration

(63) Human Rights Council, "Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, Michael Lynk", 16 March 2017, docx&usg=AOvVaw3YVysM7SG5A-78gCOJN9Mz (Accessed 1 February 2018).

(64) "Hamas sweeps to election victory", BBC, 26 January 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4650788.stm (Accessed 31 January 2018).

(65) Ali Sawafta and Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Palestinians hold local elections in West Bank but not Gaza", Reuters, 13 May 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-politics-election/palestinians-hold-local-elections-in-west-bank-but-not-gaza-idUSKBN189066 (Accessed 21 November 2017).

(66) "Hamas, Fatah sign reconciliation agreement in Cairo", Al Jazeera, 12 October 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/hamas-fatah-sign-reconciliation-agreement-cairo-171012115017367.html (Accessed 31 January 2018).

(67) Fares Akram, "Hamas Leader Abandons Longtime Base in Damascus", New York Times, 27 January 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/28/world/middleeast/khaled-meshal-the-leader-of-hamas-vacates-damascus.html (Accessed 25 November 2017).

(68) Lizzie Dearden, "Israel-Gaza conflict: 50-day war by numbers", Independent, 27 August 2014, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-gaza-conflict-50-day-war-by-numbers-9693310.html (Accessed 2 February 2018); Haroon Siddique, Paul Owen and Tom McCarthy, "Israel and Gaza conflict: Truce broken during Egyptian PM's visit - as it happened", The Guardian, 16 November 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/16/israel-gaza-conflict-egyptian-pm-solidarity-visit-live (Accessed 2 February 2018); David M. Halbfinger, Iyad Abuheweila and Jugal K. Patel, "300 Meters in Gaza: Snipers, Burning Tires and a Contested Fence", The New York Times, 13 April, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/gaza-fence-aerial.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FGaza%20Strip&action=click&contentCollection=world&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=3&pgtype=collection (Accessed 14 May 2018).

of a degree of regional order, is contingent on at least a measure of democratization.[69]

Conclusion

The paper showed that the prospects for democratization in the Levant are, at the present moment in time, not promising, albeit for different reasons in each case. The initial hopeful expectations for Egypt and Syria after 2011 have been crushed by the internal conflicts, hurting the prospects for democratization in the short term. In cases where the uprisings did not have a direct impact, such as in Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Palestine, democratization processes have stalled due to various internal factors but also external ones — factors that are often related to indirect effects of the uprisings, particularly the domestic political challenges that arose as a result of the Syrian Civil War.

The turmoil that has accompanied the downturn in the prospects of democratization in the Levant, however, does not imply that a regional order can be constructed through the restoration of authoritarian rule. The resolutions of the many conflicts that permeate the Levant (both internal and external, even though in practice they are often indistinguishable) require a measure of democratization, so that there exists a degree of governmental accountability, pluralism, and respect for basic freedoms and good governance. The region will not emerge from its present state of disorder and instability without it. This refers to internal conflicts such as in Syria, and external ones such as between Israel and the Palestinians.

(69) Perry Cammack, Nathan J. Brown and Marwan Muasher (eds.), Revitalizing Palestinian Nationalism: Options Versus Realities, Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017; Grant Rumley and Mor Yahalom, "Palestine's Democratic Deficit: Why Fatah Won't Hold Elections", Foreign Affairs, 12 October 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/palestinian-authority/2016-10-12/palestines-democratic-deficit (Accessed 26 November 2017).

The state system in the Levant, for all its problematic historical origins, remains the only available framework of political organization in the region. Democratization processes will get back on track within the parameters of either existing borders and/or internally re-organized nation-states; this is the case particularly for Syria. Democratization will lead to the strengthening of social cohesion by reducing the appeal of particularist identities and by decreasing the opportunities for foreign intervention. This, in turn, will render powers from outside the region - such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, the United States and Turkey - less able to use proxies in the Levant to pursue their own interests and agendas and thereby bolster the potential for the establishment of a regional order.

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Part II

Building a Regional Economic Framework

Discovery of Energy Reserves in the Levant and Impacts on Regional Security

Gareth M. Winrow

Introduction

Much attention has recently focused on the discovery of a number of gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean. Questions have been raised over whether these new energy reserves will create incentives to improve relations between states in the area and help promote regional cooperation, or will they contribute to the exacerbation of tensions in the eastern Mediterranean. If governments continue to disagree over the demarcation of maritime boundaries and fail to support projects, which would entail the laying of pipelines through their exclusive economic zones (EEZs), much of the gas and oil reserves will remain unexploited. Frustration over the inability to monetize energy resources could then worsen ties between states in the area. On the other hand, cooperation between states over energy issues could boost struggling economies as well as ease political tensions.

This paper will explore these issues with particular reference to energy resources in the Levant Basin Province and surrounding areas in the eastern Mediterranean. In this context, the nexus between energy and foreign policy concerns is discussed. It is important to note, though, that matters relating to energy have their own separate set of dynamics and that the role of energy companies, for example, needs to be considered. The paper will examine the attempts by governments in the region and beyond to boost cooperation by encouraging energy projects, thereby seeking to enhance regional security. However, geopolitical tensions in the area, especially over Cyprus and Israel's relations with its Arab neighbours, put at risk the realization of these projects.

Energy and Foreign Policy

The close connection between energy issues and foreign policy interests has been ably demonstrated by Correlje and van der Linde in their presentation of two possible storylines.[1] According to the "regions and empires" storyline, a neo-realist view of international relations prevails in which states emphasize the significance of geopolitical concerns and energy companies follow the policy line of their home governments. In contrast, the "markets and institutions" storyline depicts international relations within a neo-liberal framework in which functioning markets and effective institutions play key roles and the priority of energy companies is to make profits. In the case of the eastern Mediterranean, arguably features of both of these storylines are observed.

Proponents of the notion of "economic peace", such as Bijaoui, contend that economic interdependence between states promotes peace and prevents conflict.[2] In line with this argument, economic development through the exploitation of energy resources may help overcome political hurdles and ease tensions between states. In the Obama administration, the United States (U.S.) Special Envoy and Coordinator for International Affairs, Amos Hochstein, in effect promoted "economic peace" by pursuing a policy of encouraging governments in the eastern Mediterranean to

(1) Aad Correlje and Coby van der Linde, "Energy Supply Security and Geopolitics: A European Perspective", *Energy Policy*, Vol. 34, (5), 2006, pp. 532-545.

(2) Ilan Bijaoui, *The Economic Reconciliation Process: Middle Eastern Populations in Conflict*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 4.

cooperate in the energy field to provide incentives to bolster political accommodation.[3] Problems of high unemployment, economic stagnation and the financial difficulties of states in the region provided further reasons for governments to engage in political compromise and work together to benefit from the consumption and sale of energy resources. Given their recent economic difficulties, the benefits for governments in the eastern Mediterranean could be substantial if energy reserves are developed and exported to potentially lucrative outside markets. However, a number of technical, legal, political and commercial issues would first need to be addressed before energy projects may start to be implemented, and profits and transit fees secured.

The deep-rooted political problems in the eastern Mediterranean may prevent the realization of an "economic peace" in the area. For example, there is an apprehension, especially among Arab governments and peoples, that Israel could use its newly discovered energy reserves to create an "infrastructure of dependency" in the region and hence consolidate the current *status quo*, which is perceived to be in Israel's favour.[4] Under the Trump administration, Hochstein's replacements as Acting U.S. Special Envoys have been much less active in the eastern Mediterranean as Washington follows an "America First" policy.

Schaffer has argued that there is no evidence that energy can bring peace in regions of tension and conflict. Cooperation between states over energy resources may only occur after governments begin to improve relations.

(3) Tareq Baconi, "Pipelines and Pipedreams: How the EU can Support a Regional Gas Hub in the Eastern Mediterranean", *ECFR Policy Brief*, April 2017, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/pipelines_and_pipedreams_how_the_eu_can_support_a_regional_gas_hub_in_7276 (Accessed 2 October 2017), pp. 1-2.

(4) Tareq Baconi, "How Israel Uses Gas to Enforce Palestinian Dependency and Promote Normalization", Al-Shabaka Policy Brief, 12 March 2017, https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/how-israel-uses-gas-to-enforce-palestinian-dependency-and-promote-normalization/ (Accessed 20 September 2017).

Companies rarely operate in zones of conflict and banks are unlikely to fund investments in areas of tension. The construction of pipelines across state borders only commences after the signing of intergovernmental agreements.[5] Other commentators have noted that when states have "deeply securitized political relations", energy issues are more likely to heighten tensions, and in such circumstances, energy may be used as a political weapon.[6]

On the other hand, an improved political environment does not mean that certain energy projects will automatically be realized. Governments do not build pipelines. Energy companies, funding agencies, and regulatory bodies play a crucial role. Projects require financing, technical know-how, and often need to meet certain environmental standards. Usually, projects will not receive the go-ahead if they are deemed to be economically unviable. In effect, a series of benchmarks needs to be met before energy projects are approved and implemented. Producers need to have access to a market. The export of oil or gas to outside consumers may require the approval of certain transit states, and here again political problems may obstruct or delay projects which have been recognized as commercially feasible. Politics alone will not result in the realization of energy projects. However, some measure of cooperation between governments is required before companies start to build pipelines and other energy infrastructure.

(5) Brenda Schaffer, *Energy Politics*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009, pp. 4 and 38.

(6) Constantinos Adamides and Odysseas Christou, "Can Resolving Cyprus Hold the Key to Regional Energy Cooperation?" *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 15 (2), 2016, p. 87.

Energy in the Levant

According to a U.S. Geological Survey published in 2010, the Levant Basin Province is a geological structure, which covers 83,000 square kilometres of the eastern Mediterranean. The basin extends over parts of the maritime areas of the island of Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey. The survey estimated that the Levant Basin Province held undiscovered reserves of 1.7 billion barrels of recoverable oil and around 122 trillion cubic feet (about 3,420 billion cubic meters [bcm]) of recoverable gas.[7] These estimates were announced before the discovery of significant volumes of gas in Egyptian and Israeli offshore fields.

There are in total eight energy basins in the eastern Mediterranean. Until recently, most hydrocarbon production in the eastern Mediterranean was concentrated in the Nile Delta Basin, the West Arabian Province, and the Zagros Province. A report published in 2013 noted that the energy reserves of the eastern Mediterranean as a whole represented less than one per cent of the world's total proven reserves of oil and natural gas.[8] However, these resources are potentially important sources of revenue for states in the region. In addition to providing the means of energy to power the expanding economies of states in the eastern Mediterranean, gas in particular may be exported to neighbouring markets in Europe.

Although in geological terms the eastern Mediterranean is divided into a number of separate basins of which the Levant Basin Province is only one part, the area as a whole is closely connected politically and economically and the production, sale and consumption of oil and gas in the region will in many cases require cooperation between various governments. Given that most attention has recently focused on the discovery of large gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean, this paper will concentrate on the possible impact of gas extraction on regional security.

In late 2011 the American company Noble Energy announced that it had discovered substantial volumes of gas in the offshore Aphrodite field to the south of Cyprus. The field is estimated to hold recoverable reserves of approximately 120-129 bcm.[9] Together with its partners, Shell and the Israeli companies Delek Drilling and Avner Exploration, Noble is aiming to commence production in 2020 or shortly after, once markets have been identified and pipeline connections laid. Two larger gas fields have been recently discovered in the Levant Basin Province in Israeli waters. The Tamar field, which has reserves of about 318 bcm, has started operations and is delivering gas to the Israeli mainland and to Jordan.[10] Noble is also the operator of this field in a consortium with several Israeli partners. The Leviathan field has reserves of approximately 605 bcm.[11] Noble and the Israeli companies, Delek and Ratio Oil Exploration, are planning to begin production by the end of 2019, but major export deals with states in the region have yet to be concluded.

There are also unexploited gas reserves in the waters off Lebanon, Gaza and Syria. Offshore Lebanese blocks may hold 660 million barrels of oil

(7) Christopher J. Schenk et al., *U.S. Geological Survey – World Petroleum Resources Project:* "Assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas Reserves in the Levant Basin Province, Eastern Mediterranean", Report, No 2010-3014, March 2010, http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2010/3014/pdf/FS10-3014.pdf (accessed 25 September 2017).

(8) U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Eastern Mediterranean Region" (last updated 15 August 2013), https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis_includes/regions_of_interest/Eastern_Mediterranean/eastern-mediterranean.pdf (Accessed 25 September 2017), p. 5.

(9) Delek Drilling, "Aphrodite Gas Field", http://www.delekdrilling.co.il/en/project/aphrodite-gas-field (Accessed 25 September 2017).

(10) Hillel Koren, "Tamar Partners Increase Gas Field Estimate by 13%", *Globes*, 2 July 2017, http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-tamar-partners-increase-estimate-by-13-1001195086 (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(11) "Leviathan Value Raised up to $7.4 b", *Globes*, 26 September 2017, http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-leviathan-value-revised-up-to-74b-1001206229 (Accessed 4 October 2017).

and 849 bcm of gas.[12] The offshore Gaza Marine has an estimated 28.3 bcm of gas.[13] Although small, these reserves would provide a guaranteed source of energy for the one power plant in Gaza. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, Syria was a significant producer of oil and gas. However, in 2015 the Russian firm Soyuzneftegaz pulled out of a $90 million deal to drill for oil and gas in Syrian waters on account of the risks associated with the on-going conflict.[14]

The discovery by ENI in 2015 of substantial reserves of gas in the offshore Egyptian Zohr field in the Shorouk Block in the Nile Delta Basin may have significant repercussions for gas exploration in the neighbouring Levant Basin Province. Zohr has an estimated 840 bcm of reserves.[15] This was the first time gas had been discovered in carbonate rock in the eastern Mediterranean. Companies working at the field - the Italian ENI, the Russian Rosneft, and BP – started production at Zohr in December 2017.[16] The intention is to export a portion of the gas after local energy needs are satisfied. Zohr is located only six kilometers from the Cypriot offshore Block 11 where the French firm Total has carried out exploratory drilling. The Zohr discovery has raised hopes that similar volumes could be tapped in the carbonate formations in the Cypriot EEZ in the Levant Basin Province. The Cypriot Energy Minister, Yiorgis Lakkotrypis, declared that the gas discovery at Zohr had compelled his government to do a complete re-evaluation of the energy potential of the Cypriot EEZ which led Nicosia to launch a third licensing round for offshore energy exploration.[17] However, expectations have been somewhat lowered after Lakkotrypis announced in September 2017 that initial drilling in the Onisiphoros gas field in Block 11 had been disappointing.[18] It appeared that the field could not be developed as a "stand-alone" project.

Discovering gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean is all well and good, but for these finds to be monetized gas must be sold at a reasonable price in markets. This, in turn, requires the laying of pipelines and the construction of other energy infrastructure, which would necessitate cooperation between companies and governments.

Energy and Regional Cooperation in the Levant

There are on-going attempts to promote cooperation and boost security in the broader Mediterranean region by making use of recent gas finds. These initiatives come from within and outside the region and involve energy companies, states and the European Union (EU). The record so far has been mixed. The discovery of considerable reserves of gas at the Zohr field in August 2015 encouraged ENI to publicize its plans to develop a liquefied natural gas (LNG) hub in the eastern Mediterranean. Here, the

(12) Laura El-Katiri, "Political Dialogue to Facilitate the Development of Energy Resources in the Eastern Mediterranean", in Silvia Colombo and Nicolo Sartori (eds.), *The OSCE's Contribution to Energy Governance in the Mediterranean Region*, Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2016, p. 11.

(13) Suzanne Carlson, "Pivoting Energy Relations in the Eastern Mediterranean", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 15 (1), 2016, p. 76.

(14) Natalia Shurmina and Anastasia Lyrchikova, "Reuter's Summit – Russia's Soyuzneftegaz Drops Plans for Offshore Oil and Gas Exploration in Syria", *Reuters*, 29 September 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/russia-syria-oil/reuters-summit-russias-soyuzneftegaz-drops-plans-for-offshore-oil-and-gas-exploration-in-syria-idUSL5N11Z2HO20150929 (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(15) Hedy Cohen, "ENI's Egypt Gas Find Limits Israel's Export Options", *Globes*, 1 September 2015, http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-enis-egypt-gas-find-limits-israels-export-options-1001065749 (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(16) "Rosneft Starts Production at Gas Field in Egypt", *Reuters*, 20 December 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-egypt-zohr/rosneft-starts-production-at-zohr-gas-field-in-egypt-idUSKBN1EE200 (Accessed 23 January 2017).

(17) Charles Ellinas et al., "Hydrocarbon Developments in the Eastern Mediterranean: The Case for Pragmatism", August 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/hydrocarbon-developments-in-the-eastern-mediterranean (accessed 25 September 2017), p. 5.

(18) Elias Hazou, "Onisiphoros Gas Field Not Commercially Viable", *Cyprus Mail*, 12 September 2017,http://cyprus-mail.com/2017/09/12/onisiphoros-gas-field-not-commercially-viable/ (Accessed 4 October 2017).

aim is to pool gas assets in Israel, Egypt, Cyprus and Libya and to take advantage of ENI's underused LNG plant at Damietta in Egypt.[19] ENI has acquired rights to conduct exploratory drilling in a number of blocks off the Cypriot coast. The intention is to deliver LNG to nearby markets in Europe.

An LNG hub in Egypt could be accommodated within the EU's wider scheme to develop a gas hub for the Mediterranean. On 11 June 2015, the European Commission launched the Euro-Mediterranean Platform for Gas Cooperation to encourage dialogue and partnership between the EU and states in the southern and eastern Mediterranean.[20] Through encouraging market dynamics and helping to provide a regulatory framework in the region, Brussels is aiming to support exploration, production and the development of the infrastructure necessary to establish a competitive gas market. But, given the complications involved and the problematic economic and political backdrop in the Mediterranean, a properly functioning gas hub in the region will not be realized in the immediate future.

In a report released in February 2017, the European Commission stated that the eastern Mediterranean is "a promising source of gas supply" and offers increasing "diversification opportunities".[21] In 2016, Russia accounted for over 38 per cent of the EU's gas imports.[22] The EU will need to increase gas imports given an expected decline in European gas production. Brussels does not want to be too dependent on Russia for gas supplies bearing in mind problematic relations with the Putin regime. However, it will not be easy for eastern Mediterranean gas to break into the European market. Russia can pipe gas to Europe at a cheap price and gas, for example, from the Levant Basin Province and from the Zohr field would also have to compete with increasing LNG exports from the U.S.

Governments in the eastern Mediterranean have embarked on three initiatives to enhance regional stability through tripartite cooperation. The leaders of Greece, Cyprus and Egypt have held five summit meetings since November 2014. Four similar summit meetings have been organized by Greece, Cyprus and Israel since January 2016. These gatherings have led to spin-off ministerial meetings and working groups which have included extensive discussions on energy issues. A first summit meeting of the leaders of Cyprus, Greece and Jordan held in Nicosia in January 2018 also discussed energy issues.[23] It will be difficult, though, for Greece and Cyprus to include both Egypt and Israel in a quadrilateral format because of continuing mistrust between the governments in Cairo and Tel Aviv.

In April and December 2017 meetings did take place between the energy ministers of Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Italy to discuss the prospects for

(19) Stephen Jewkes and Oleg Vukmanovic, "ENI Plans to Hold the Keys for East Mediterranean Gas Exports", *Reuters*, 15 September 2015, http://uk.reuters.com/article/eni-mediterranean-gas/eni-plans-to-hold-the-keys-for-east-mediterranean-gas-exports-idUKL5N11H18O20150915 (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(20) European Commission, "Commissioner Launches Euro-Mediterranean Gas Platform", 11 June 2015, https://ec.europa.eu/energy/en/news/commissioner-launches-euro-mediterranean-gas-platform (Accessed 20 September 2017).

(21) European Commission, "Second Report on the State of the Energy Union – COM (2017) 53 Final", 1 February 2017, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/2nd-report-state-energy-union_en.pdf (Accessed 27 September 2017), p. 9.

(22) Eurostat, "EU Imports of Energy Products – Recent Developments", April 2017, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/EU_imports_of_energy_products_-_recent_developments (Accessed 27 September 2017).

(23) "Cyprus, Greece and Jordan Underline Close Cooperation", *Cyprus Mail*, 16 January 2018, http://cyprus-mail.com/2018/01/16/tspiras-arrives-presidential-palace-cyprus-greece-jordan-summit/ (Accessed 23 January 2018).

the EastMed Gas Pipeline project.[24] A 2,000 kilometer pipeline is envisaged which could carry 15-20 bcm of gas annually from Israel and Cyprus to Italy along a pipe that would stretch across the eastern Mediterranean and pass through Crete and mainland Greece. The $6-7 billion project has been promoted by the European Commission and as "a project of common interest" is entitled to financial support from Brussels. It remains unclear if and when this project will be implemented. Questions have been raised over its commercial feasibility. Charles Ellinas, a prominent energy expert, has suggested that gas would need to be sold in Europe at $8 per million British Thermal Units (mmBTU) to make the pipeline profitable. Gazprom could currently sell gas to Europe for as little as $3 per mmBTU.[25] The project would also have to compete with possible future LNG exports from Egypt.

Energy companies may bolster these attempts by the EU and states in the eastern Mediterranean to encourage cooperation. The prominent role played by ENI has already been noted. Shell may also become a driver for the realization of energy projects. A co-owner in the Aphrodite field and an investor and operator in the under-used Idku LNG plant in Egypt, Shell could play a decisive role in plans to develop energy cooperation between Nicosia and Cairo. In August 2016, the governments of Cyprus and Egypt concluded a provisional agreement to lay an underwater gas pipeline to connect Aphrodite with the Egyptian mainland.[26] Shell is seriously considering purchasing 5 bcm annually from the Leviathan field. This volume could be combined with future output from Aphrodite and transported to Idku for export in the form of LNG.[27] Noble Energy, which is playing a leading role in Israeli gas projects, is also considering involvement in plans to deliver Cypriot gas to Egypt.[28] Recent changes in legislation in Egypt have opened up the possibility of private Egyptian companies concluding energy deals with outside partners.[29] In February 2018, Dolphinus Holdings signed two binding agreements with the companies working at the Tamar and Leviathan fields to purchase 64 bcm over a ten-year period.[30]

Significantly, Turkey has been excluded from the various initiatives in the eastern Mediterranean. This is primarily because of the outstanding disputes between Ankara, Nicosia and Athens over the future of the divided island of Cyprus. Disagreements over maritime boundaries are a further complication. For example, in May 2015, because of disputes over continental shelves and EEZs, the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavuşoğlu, declared that any agreement on gas exploration between Cyprus, Greece and Egypt would be "invalid" and Turkey would not allow

(24) Sharon Udasin, "Israel, European States Advance Plans for World's Longest Underwater Gas Pipeline", *The Jerusalem Post*, 3 April 2017, http://www.jpost.com/Business-and-Innovation/Energy-ministers-eye-2025-for-completion-of-Israel-Europe-gas-pipeline-485953 (Accessed 4 October 2017); and, "Greece, Italy, Israel and Cyprus Back Natgas pipeline to Europe", *Reuters*, 5 December 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/energy-mediterranean-natgas/greece-italy-israel-and-cyprus-back-natgas-pipeline-to-europe-idUSL8N1O537F (Accessed 23 January 2018).

(25) "Cyprus Conference Focuses on Future of Energy and Challenges Ahead for the Region", *Famagusta Gazette*, 16 March 2017, http://famagusta-gazette.com/cyprus-conference-focuses-on-future-of-energy-and-challenges-ahead-for-the-p39022-69.htm (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(26) "Cyprus Signs Deal with Egypt for Gas Transfers via Pipeline", *Reuters*, 31 August 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/cyprus-egypt-gas/cyprus-signs-deal-with-egypt-for-gas-transfers-via-pipeline-idUSL8N1BC0XQ (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(27) Yaacov Benmeleh and Rakteem Katakey, "Shell to Mull Buying Israeli, Cyprus Gas for Egypt Plant", *Bloomberg*, 20 August 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-08-20/shell-is-said-to-mull-buying-israeli-cyprus-gas-for-egypt-plant (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(28) Sonia Gorodeisky, "Noble Mulls Helping Build Cyprus-Egypt Pipeline – Report", *Globes*, 13 December 2017, http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-noble-mulls-helping-build-cyprus-egypt-pipeline-report-1001215422 (Accessed 23 January 2018).

(29) Sonia Gorodeisky, "Leviathan Partners in Egypt Gas Export Talks – Report", *Globes*, 10 August 2017, http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-leviathan-partners-in-egypt-gas-export-talks-report-1001200874 (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(30) Sonia Gorodeisky and Amiram Barkat, "Delek, Noble Sign $15 b Egyptian Gas Deal with Egyptian Co", *Globes*, 19 February 2019, http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-delek-noble-sign-15b-egyptian-gas-deal-1001224485 (Accessed 11 May 2018).

such deals to proceed.[31] According to the governments of Cyprus, Egypt and Greece, energy cooperation in the Mediterranean region would be better served if states respected international law.[32] This may be taken as a pointed reference to Turkey, which is not a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), although Israel is also not a signatory. Undoubtedly, the Cyprus problem is one of the major stumbling blocks to energy cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean.

Problems Concerning Cyprus

This paper will not go over in detail the longstanding tensions between the Greek and Turkish communities on the divided island of Cyprus. Hopes of a possible resolution had been raised in April 2015 after the election of Mustafa Akıncı as President of the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC). Akıncı had close personal relations with the President of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), Nicos Anastasiades. However, peace talks held under United Nations (UN) auspices collapsed in Switzerland in July 2017, primarily because of disagreement over the presence of Turkish troops on the island and a failure of the two sides to reach an agreement for political power sharing after the settlement.

There has been talk of how cooperation over the exploitation of gas resources in Cypriot offshore waters could facilitate a resolution of the Cyprus dispute.[33] This does not appear likely for the foreseeable future given the conflicting and entrenched positions of the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots backed by Turkey. According to the government in Nicosia, the RoC is a sovereign state, which will not be dictated to by Turkey. Stressing that energy resources belong exclusively to the recognized government of Cyprus and that their position is in conformity with international law, the Greek Cypriots insist that energy resources may only be shared by the two communities on the island after a political settlement is concluded. The position of Turkey and the TRNC is that oil and gas exploration should only commence after a settlement is reached. Refusing to recognize the government of the RoC as a sovereign authority, the Turks and Turkish Cypriots argue, in effect, that the two communities on the island are co-owners of natural resources and both should benefit from hydrocarbons discovered in Cypriot waters.[34]

As Turkey does not recognize the RoC as a sovereign state, no demarcation of continental shelves between Turkey and the RoC has been concluded, but Turkey and the TRNC negotiated an agreement on the demarcation of their continental shelves in the eastern Mediterranean in September 2011. In line with this deal, the TRNC issued licenses for the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) to carry out exploratory drilling in one onshore and seven offshore blocks claimed by the TRNC. These blocks overlap with 40 per cent of the area claimed by the RoC. More significantly, by the September 2011 agreement, Turkey contends that it has the right to explore for oil and gas in parts of offshore blocks also claimed by Nicosia but which Ankara declares to be part of Turkey's continental shelf - i.e., in blocks 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7. Ankara has insisted that there should be no exploration in these blocks "under any circumstances" and that they "will take all necessary measures" to prevent drilling there.[35]

(31) "Turkey Disregards Mediterranean Gas Deal", *Azvision.az*, 8 May 2015, https://en.azvision.az/news/10553/turkey-disregards-mediterranean-gas-deal.html (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(32) "Egypt-Greece-Cyprus Summit's Trilateral Declaration", *Themanews.com*, 10 November 2014, http://en.protothema.gr/egypt-greece-cyprus-cairo-summits-trilateral-declaration/ (Accessed 11 May 2018).

(33) Matthew Bryza, "Energy Cooperation Should be a Catalyst for Cyprus Peace Talks", *Atlantic Council*, 19 January 2018, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/energy-cooperation-should-be-a-catalyst-for-cyprus-peace-talks (Accessed 23 January 2018).

(34) Ayla Gürel et al., *The Cyprus Hydrocarbons Issue: Context, Positions and Future Scenarios*, Oslo, Peace Research Institute, 2013, pp. 41-54.

(35) Ibid, pp. 63-64.

The RoC has concluded agreements with Egypt, Israel and Lebanon to demarcate EEZs, although the deal with Lebanon has still to be ratified by the Lebanese parliament at the time of writing. Following these agreements, Nicosia has conducted three licensing rounds in which international energy companies such as Noble, ENI, Total and ExxonMobil have secured rights to carry out exploratory drilling in offshore Cypriot blocks. This has prompted Ankara to issue warnings to these companies and to despatch vessels to monitor drilling operations, as in July 2017.[36] Particular attention was given to the plans of ENI and Total to commence exploratory work in early 2018 in the disputed Block 6. In a letter addressed to the UN Secretary General, the Turkish authorities expressed their "grave concern" regarding the "provocative act" by the Greek Cypriots to allow drilling work in the so-called Block 6.[37] Surprisingly, perhaps, tensions escalated in February 2018 after the Turkish navy blocked ENI from undertaking drilling work in Block 3.[38] This was immediately after Turkey had not prevented the Italian firm from carrying out preliminary drilling at the contested Block 6.[39]

Problems over Cyprus are also impacting the possible construction of a gas pipeline connecting the Leviathan field with the Turkish mainland. Berat Albayrak, Turkey's Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, had been intending to visit Tel Aviv before the end of 2017 to sign an intergovernmental agreement for the building of the planned 8-10 bcm capacity pipeline.[40] This visit appears to have been postponed indefinitely after relations between Turkey and Israel nosedived following President Trump's decision in December 2017 to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. As in the case of the EU, an Israel-Turkey gas pipeline would enable the Turkish market to be less dependent on Russian gas imports. However, because of the on-going Syrian conflict, the pipeline would have to be run through the EEZ of Cyprus. According to UNCLOS, a coastal state does not have the right to prevent other states from laying pipelines in its EEZ. But, the RoC, as a transit state, could delay indefinitely the laying of a pipeline in its EEZ by insisting on environmental impact assessment reports.[41]

Obstructing the construction of a gas pipeline between Israel and Turkey could have wider negative repercussions on energy cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean. It would seriously damage Ankara's plans for Turkey to become an overland gas corridor connecting the eastern Mediterranean with the rest of Europe. This would enhance Turkey's strategic importance, and Ankara could also benefit from collecting transit revenues. For example, there has been talk of an Israel-Turkey gas connection being extended to hook up at the Turkish-Greek border with the planned Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), which will extend to Italy via Greece.[42] TAP will initially transport gas from Azerbaijan, but the pipeline may be doubled in capacity to carry 20 bcm each year. As of May 2018,

(36) "Turkey Sends Ships and Submarine to Monitor Drilling Vessel Near Cyprus", *Reuters*, 13 July 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-cyprus-energy-vessel/turkey-sends-ships-and-submarine-to-monitor-drilling-vessel-near-cyprus-idUSKBN19Y1XX (Accessed 23 January 2018).

(37) UN General Assembly, "Letter Dated 12 April 2017 from the Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations Addressed to the UN Secretary General", UN General Assembly Seventy-First Session, Agenda Item 73 (a) – Oceans and the Law of the Sea, http://undocs.org/A/71/875 (Accessed 21 September 2017).

(38) "Report: ENI Moving Drillship to Morocco After Turkish Navy 'Threatens Force' in Cyprus", *offshoreenergytoday.com*, 23 February 2018, https://www.offshoreenergytoday.com/report-eni-moving-drillship-to-morocco-after-turkish-navy-threatens-force-in-cyprus/ (Accessed 11 May 2018).

(39) "Report: ENI, Total in Large Gas Discovery Offshore Cyprus", *offshoreenergytoday.com*, 5 February 2018, https://www.offshoreenergytoday.com/report-eni-total-in-large-gas-discovery-offshore-cyprus/ (Accessed 11 May 2018).

(40) "Turkish Energy Minister 'to Visit Israel for Pipeline Deal'", *The Times of Israel*, 12 July 2017, http://www.timesofisrael.com/turkish-energy-minister-to-visit-israel-for-pipeline-deal/ (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(41) Gareth M. Winrow, "The Anatomy of a Possible Pipeline: The Case of Turkey and Leviathan and Gas Politics in the Eastern Mediterranean", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 18 (5), 2016, p. 442.

(42) Matthew Bryza, "Eastern Mediterranean Natural Gas: Potential or Historic Breakthrough Among Israel, Turkey and Cyprus", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 12 (3), 2013, p. 39.

given the political problems in the eastern Mediterranean, this additional volume would probably be filled by gas from Russia rather than from Israel.

Work on development of the Aphrodite field could also be delayed if there is no progress on advancing the Israel-Turkish gas pipeline project. Aphrodite overlaps with the Yishai gas fields in Israeli waters. Because they are part of the same geological structure, a unitization agreement needs to be concluded between the RoC and Israel to decide how much of Aphrodite extends into the Yishai fields. Tel Aviv is also insisting that its approval is required before Aphrodite may be developed. The unitization agreement had been expected to be signed in 2010 when Israel and Cyprus concluded a deal demarcating their EEZs,[43] but was still not signed as of May 2018. There are reports that this dispute may go to international arbitration.[44] It is possible that Israel will only approve of a unitization agreement if the RoC allows the laying of the Israel-Turkey gas pipeline through its EEZ. Continuing delays may be costly for Nicosia and could result in the collapse of plans to transport gas from Aphrodite to Egypt.

It is difficult under the current political conditions to envisage progress soon in the resolution of the Cyprus dispute. This could, however, have serious consequences for energy cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean and could damage the Greece-Cyprus-Israel regional initiative. Large reserves of gas may thus remain stranded in the Levant Basin Province for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, problems in realizing the Israel-Turkey gas pipeline could boost the prospects for the

(43) Amiram Barkat and Hedy Cohen, "Israel, Cyprus Disagree over Aphrodite Gas Field", *Globes*, 13 October 2015, http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-israel-cyprus-in-disagreement-over-aphrodite-gas-field-1001073460 (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(44) Sonia Gorodeisky and Amiram Barkat, "Israel-Cyprus Gas Dispute Goes to Int'l Arbitration", *Globes*, 1 May 2018, http://www.globes.co.il/en/article-israel-cyprus-gas-dispute-goes-to-intl-arbitration-1001233992 (Accessed 11 May 2018).

EastMed Gas Pipeline and for Egypt to become an important LNG hub as gas from Leviathan could be used to develop these alternative projects. However, in addition to Cyprus, there are other disputes over energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean, which could have a negative impact on regional stability.

Other Issues of Contention

The failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and continuing tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbours complicate Tel Aviv's attempts to use its new-found energy resources to improve political ties and enhance economic relations with states in the eastern Mediterranean. Energy has also been used brutally as a political weapon in the intra-Palestinian clash over the administration of the Gaza Strip as discussed below.

In spite of having diplomatic relations with Egypt and Jordan, Israeli officials have struggled to consolidate ties with these states by playing the energy card. In the case of Egypt, the Egyptian authorities recognize a maritime border with Gaza and not with Israel. Until 2012, Egypt had exported gas to Israel by a pipeline running through the Sinai. Deliveries were suspended after attacks on the pipeline by hostile Bedouin tribes and Israel is currently seeking $2 billion in compensation from Egypt for the termination of this gas agreement.[45] Nevertheless, a breakthrough was reached with the previously mentioned agreement between Dolphinus Holdings and partners in the Tamar and Leviathan fields. Under this deal, gas may be piped to Egypt from Israel via Jordan in order to avoid the more direct but less secure route through the Sinai.

(45) "Swiss Court Tells Egyptian Energy Companies to Compensate Israel", *Reuters*, 28 April 2017, https://uk.reuters.com/article/israel-egypt-compensation-idUKL8N1I088R (Accessed 11 May 2018).

Starting in January 2017, small volumes of gas from Israel's offshore Tamar gas field are being delivered to Jordan in line with a deal concluded with two Jordanian state-owned companies, Arab Potash and Jordan Bromine. In September 2016, the partners, working at the Leviathan gas field, successfully concluded negotiations with the National Electric Power Company of Jordan to supply 8.5 bcm of gas over a 15-year period. News of these deals has aroused public anger in Jordan with concerns that funds raised could be used by the Israeli authorities to finance its continuing occupation of Palestinian territories.[46]

Potentially much more worrying is the danger of open conflict between Israel and Lebanon over the ownership of disputed gas fields. Tensions escalated after Lebanese officials declared in January 2017 that they were launching a licensing round for companies to explore five offshore blocks. The Israeli authorities contend that at least three of these blocks extend into Israel's EEZ and they are threatening to pass a Maritime Areas Bill to claim ownership of the disputed territory. According to officials in Beirut, the passage of such legislation would be tantamount to a "declaration of war".[47] In December 2017 the Lebanese government announced that it had approved a bid by the Total-ENI-Novatek consortium to develop two offshore blocks. One of these – Block 9 – extends into the disputed waters.[48] Under the Trump administration, the U.S. may play a less active role in attempting to mediate between the parties and this could lead to an exacerbation of tensions between Israel and Lebanon. Officials at the U.S. State Department had been especially active in mediation in the period between 2012 and 2016.[49]

Israel wasted an opportunity to improve ties with the Palestinians after a provisional deal signed in January 2014 to fuel the planned power generating plant at Jenin on the West Bank with gas from the Leviathan field. The Palestine Power Generation Company withdrew from the agreement in March 2015 citing delays over regulatory issues in Israel rather than political tensions.[50] However, politics has prevented energy cooperation between the Israelis and Palestinians with regard to the offshore Gaza Marine gas field. The Israelis have opposed the field's development because of clashes with Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The most blatant use of energy as a political weapon was evident in the case of Gaza and the bitter rivalry between Hamas and Fatah. Furious over Hamas forming a local administration committee to run Gaza, the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority in the West Bank blocked the export of diesel fuel deliveries, which led to the temporary closing of the power plant in Gaza in April 2017.[51] The Palestinian Authority also cut back on payments for electricity from Israel that was transmitted to Gaza. Confronted with a humanitarian disaster, in September 2017 Hamas agreed to dismantle the administration committee and hand over all

(46) "Israel Becomes a Gas Exporter with First Delivery to Jordan", *The Times of Israel*, 2 March 2017, https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-becomes-a-gas-exporter-with-first-delivery-to-jordan/ (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(47) Matthew Joaquin, "Israel-Lebanon Maritime Dispute Explained", *Aljazeera*, 31 March 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/03/israel-lebanon-maritime-dispute-explained-170327074710548.html (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(48) Dana Khraiche, "Total, Eni, Novatek Win Lebanon's First Offshore Licenses", *Bloomberg*, 15 December 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-14/total-eni-novatek-win-lebanon-s-first-offshore-energy-licenses (Accessed 23 January 2018).

(49) Joe Macaron, "US Hits Deadlock in Lebanon-Israel Border Mediation", *Al Monitor*, 22 February 2018, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/us-mediation-lebanon-israel-gas-impasse.html (Accessed 11 May 2018).

(50) Sharon Udasin, "Palestinian Power Company Nixing Leviathan Gas Import Deal", *The Jerusalem Post*, 11 March 2015, http://www.jpost.com/Business/Palestinian-Power-Generation-Company-nixing-Leviathan-gas-import-deal-393570 (Accessed 4 October 2017).

(51) "Gaza's Only Power Plant Runs Out of Fuel", *Aljazeera*, 16 April 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/04/gaza-power-plant-runs-fuel-170416165402729.html (Accessed 23 January 2018).

government functions in Gaza to Fatah. This resulted in the Palestinian Authority in January 2018 resuming payments for electricity to be delivered to Gaza from Israel.[52]

The case of Gaza is a clear illustration of how energy and politics at the local level may overlap. The examples of the dispute over Cyprus and Israel's difficulties with its Arab neighbours and Turkey show how energy issues cannot be separated from geopolitics and wider regional security concerns in the eastern Mediterranean. Here, one should also note that the Syrian conflict has stalled the further development of Syrian oil and gas fields and prevented the possible laying of an Israel-Turkey gas pipeline through Syria's EEZ. It is highly unlikely that Syria will re-emerge as a significant energy player in the eastern Mediterranean in the foreseeable future given the intensification of the civil war in Syria in early 2018.

Prospects

Both the "regions and empires" and "markets and institutions" storylines of Correlje and van der Linde appear to be at play with regard to energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean. This seems to be evident in the case of Russia, a key outside player, which has become increasingly involved in the geopolitics of the region. It may be argued that it is in Russia's interests to act as a spoiler to ensure that gas is not exported from the eastern Mediterranean, which could then challenge Gazprom's position in the European market. However, Moscow has the advantage of being able to sell its piped gas to the EU at a lower price than its rivals, and Gazprom will be able to further cement its hold if the planned two legs of the Turkish Stream network are realized, linking Russia to Europe via Turkey, and bypassing Ukraine. While the first leg will carry Russian gas to Turkey, a second leg, if completed, will transport 16 bcm annually to European markets.[53] Given the recent hostilities between Russia and Ukraine, a second leg would ensure that substantial volumes of Russian gas would continue to be exported to Europe without being dependent on Ukraine as a transit state. In this context, it seems that Russia is able to keep its options open and is also willing to participate upstream in energy producing countries in the eastern Mediterranean. For example, in December 2016 Rosneft acquired a 30 per cent stake in the Egyptian Zohr gas field.[54]

The example of the Levant Basin Province and other nearby geological structures in the eastern Mediterranean shows how energy and foreign policy issues overlap. The longstanding political problems and tensions in the region may frustrate the ambitions of the economic peace proponents. The realization of energy projects may continue to be impeded and further obstacles placed in the way of closer regional cooperation. However, neither governments nor companies will want to see large volumes of gas stranded in the eastern Mediterranean. The discovery of energy resources may not bring peace to zones of conflict and tension. But, if large commercial opportunities beckon, companies and banks may be prepared to accept a certain measure of political risk to promote particular energy projects. In such circumstances governments may decide that it is in their interests to compromise over longstanding political concerns.

(52) Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Palestinian Authority Says Resuming Payment for Gaza's Israeli Electricity", *Reuters*, 3 January 2018, https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-israel-palestinians/palestinian-authority-says-resuming-payment-for-gazas-israeli-electricity-idUKKBN1ES1HF (Accessed 23 January 2018).

(53) Elena Kosolapova, "Russian Gas from Turkish Stream Likely to go Through TAP – Expert", *Trend News Agency*, 12 July 2017, https://en.trend.az/other/commentary/2776531.html (Accessed 23 January 2018).

(54) Stephen Jewkes and Valentina Za, "ENI Spreads Egypt Gas Field Risk with Rosneft Stake Sale", *Reuters*, 12 December 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eni-zohr-rosneft-oil/eni-spreads-egypt-gas-field-risk-with-rosneft-stake-sale-idUSKBN14112U (Accessed 4 October 2017).

With regard to the eastern Mediterranean, the prospects for the construction of a gas pipeline from the Leviathan gas field to Turkey still appear slim given the deep-rooted problems over Cyprus and tensions with Israel. Competition is more likely between the proposed EastMed Gas Pipeline and plans to export large volumes of LNG from Egyptian ports to Europe, although this would then be at the expense of including Turkey in a wider regional framework of cooperation.

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Prospects for Economic Integration in the Levant

Nader Habibi

Introduction

The shockwaves of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings are still being felt in many countries in the Middle East. Nowhere have the consequences of these uprisings been more significant than in the Levant region, particularly in Syria and Iraq. While the uprisings, which began in Tunisia and spread quickly to many Arab countries, were contained by state power or, as was the case in several countries, political reform, in Syria, uprisings would morph into a bloody civil war. In that country the uprisings against the Bashar Al-Assad regime that began in late 2011, evolved into a multi-front sectarian civil war and a costly ethnic/sectarian conflict that has been fueled by proxy wars among regional powers and global superpowers alike for more than six years.

Prior to the 2011 uprisings, the six countries that constitute the Levant region (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Turkey) had made visible progress toward expansion of trade and economic cooperation. The volume of bilateral trade among these countries grew steadily between 2000 and 2011 as the entire region benefited from several positive developments. First, the high oil and gas revenues of the Middle Eastern oil producers had a positive effect on Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, which receive large amounts of remittances from their workers in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar. Second, the export and market-oriented economic reforms in most Levant countries contributed to the growth of economic cooperation. The only exception was Iraq, which was adversely affected by the U.S. military invasion of 2003 and the turmoil that followed this invasion for several years. Third, the Justice and Development Party government, which has governed Turkey since 2002, actively promoted closer economic and diplomatic relations with its Middle Eastern neighbors.

Trade and economic cooperation among Levant countries, particularly Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq has deep historical roots that stretch back to the Ottoman Empire. During the 16th to mid-19th centuries, when the entire region was part of the Ottoman Empire, the political barriers to trade were minimal. The local rulers that governed with the approval of the Ottoman Sultans facilitated the free flow of goods and people throughout the Levant region while only occasionally imposing restrictions on food exports during local shortages.[1] European colonization of the Levant and the artificial creation of Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Iraq after the First World War created significant barriers against trade and economic cooperation in the region. The newly created Arabic speaking states were under the economic and trade domination of the United Kingdom and France until they eventually gained full independence following the Second World War. During the period of European colonial domination, intra-Levant economic relations remained depressed, as each country's economy was reoriented toward its European patron.[2]

On the other hand, after World War II Turkey primarily focused on strengthening its economic and diplomatic links to Europe and showed little interest in its Middle Eastern neighbors. In the meantime, the Levant

(1) Şevket Pamuk, "The Evolution of Factor Markets in the Ottoman Empire, 1500–1800", paper presented at Global Economic History Network Workshop on "The Rise, Organization and Institutional Framework of Factor Markets", 23–25 June 2005, http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/papers/pamuk05.pdf (Accessed 26 February 2018), p. 10.

(2) Eric Schewe, "Post-war Economies (Middle East)", International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 2017, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-post-war_economies_middle_east-2017-10-24.pdf (Accessed 2 November 2017).

nations were preoccupied with the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 1950s and 1960s. Political demands for unity were mainly focused on military and political unity and there were several failed attempts for political integration by Syria and Egypt.3 Like the rest of the Arab world, the Arab countries of Levant were caught in the cold war alliances with the former Soviet Union and the United States, which left little opportunities for regional economic cooperation. As a NATO member and a strategic ally of the U.S. and Israel, Turkey was not a good candidate to invite the Arab countries of Levant into any regional economic cooperation initiatives in those decades. Furthermore, disputes over the flow of Euphrates and Tigris waters from Turkey into Syria also caused diplomatic tensions between the two countries from late the 1960s until the early 2000s.4

While war and political instability have led to a setback in prospects for stronger economic integration among Levant countries, there is still a sizable amount of formal and informal trade among them, which reflects the adaptability of both private enterprises and state actors in the face of conflicts and geopolitical uncertainties. The fragmentation of Syria into several warring sub-regions, for example, has created opportunities for neighboring countries to trade with the Syrian regions adjacent to their borders that have been governed by non-hostile factions.5 As a result of this adaptability and pragmatism, bilateral trade and investment relations among Levant countries will continue under a variety of scenarios regardless of the outcome of the current conflicts and proxy wars in the region. The net effect of violence and conflict is to keep trade levels below their full potential.

(3) Adeed Dawisha, Arab nationalism in the twentieth century: from triumph to despair, Oxfordshire, Princeton University Press, 2003.

(4) Ayşegül Kibaroğlu, "Turkey–Syria Water Relations: Institutional Developments and Political Confrontations in the Europhates and Tigris Region", in Raymon Hinnebusch and Özlem Tür (eds), Turkey–Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity, London, Routledge, 2016.

(5) Laurence Lee, "Turkey-Syria Business Booms as Conflict continues", Aljazeera, 14 March 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/turkey-syria-trade-booms-conflict-continues-160314150048463.html (Accessed 18 February 2018).

In this chapter, I will examine the prospects for economic cooperation among the six countries that constitute the Levant region.[6] The analysis will take into account the unique geopolitical environment of the Middle East, which imposes several political and security risks for investment and economic activity. I will also analyze the trade policy and economic structure of the Levant nations, which are relevant for the region's prospects for economic cooperation.

Progress before 2011

The period between 2002 and 2010 should be viewed as the golden era of economic cooperation in the Levant. In this eight-year interval, the countries of the Levant experienced an unprecedented growth in their investment and trade relations (see charts 2 and 3 below). Turkey was the primary driver of this remarkable economic integration initiative. Several political and economic reforms in Turkey encouraged the country to move in this direction. The most important factor was the reorientation of Turkey's economic development strategy from import-substitution to an export-oriented growth strategy, which began in 1980s.[7] Under this new policy the Turkish government incentivized private industry to become more competitive and compete in global markets. The government also engaged in active trade diplomacy to expand Turkey's trade relations.

While this export-orientated transformation was underway, the country experienced a political transformation that was also favorable to Turkey-Middle East relations. The victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey's 2002 parliamentary elections served as the main driving force for the promotion of Turkey's economic relations with the Levant.

(6) Levant can include Israel. But, since economic interaction between Israel and many Levant countries is constraint, Israel is not included in this study.

(7) Ziya Öniş and Steven B. Webb, "Political economy of policy reform in Turkey in the 1980s", Policy Research Working Papers, WPS 1059, Washington, DC, World Bank, 1992.

The moderate Islamist AKP showed a strong desire for an expansion of Turkey's economic and diplomatic relations with its Arab and Muslim neighbors.[8]

While the economic relations among the Arab countries of Levant (Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Iraq) were overshadowed by diplomatic tensions and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Turkey pursued proactive bilateral trade diplomacy with each of these countries. Turkey offered a wide range of agricultural and processed food products to its Arab neighbors. At the same time, advances in Turkey's industrial and manufacturing technologies enabled it to offer a wide range of intermediate industrial products and engineering services.

Between 2002-2010, Turkey signed many economic agreements with Arab countries including several in Levant. The first of these trade and investment agreements was signed with Syria (2004), followed by Egypt (2005), Jordan (2009) and Lebanon (2010).[9] They were part of a broader effort by the AKP government to expand its diplomatic and economic linkages to the Middle East. Closer ties with Muslim Middle Eastern countries were in line with the preferences of the more conservative supporters of the AKP in the Asian (Anatolian) regions of Turkey. While no agreement was signed with the Iraqi government, Turkey managed to expand its economic relations with both the Arab and the Kurdish regions of Iraq in this period as well. In these years, Iraq served as the largest market in the Levant for Turkish exports.[10]

(8) Turkey made a similar effort to promote closer economic cooperation with Muslim countries in 1997, when the Welfare Party (WP - Refah Partisi) governed the country for a brief period before it was forced to move out by the military. For the efforts initiated by the WP Prime Minister Necmeddin Erbakan, see Ali Çarkoğlu et al., The Political Economy of Regional Cooperation in the Middle East, London Routledge, 2005, p. 207.

(9) These agreements dealt with goods trade, but Levant countries have made little progress in service trade that includes tourism, and employment opportunities.

(10) For example, Iraq's share in Turkey's total exports in 2006 and 2009 were 2.7% and 4.5% respectively. The comparable figures for Turkey's next largest partner in Levant (i.e., Syria,) were 0.62% and 1.2% respectively. See https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/tur/show/all/2009/ (Accessed 10 February 2018).

Trade Complementarity among Levant Countries

In addition to the diplomatic efforts of Turkey, the trade complementarity of the Levant economies was also high enough to increase trade once policy barriers were reduced. When the export products of one country resemble the imports of a trading partner, they have a high propensity to trade with one another (for example an oil exporter and an oil importer). Using detailed bilateral trade data among nations, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) generates an annual Trade Complementarity Index (TCI), which is useful for assessing the trade potential between nations.

Table 1: Trade Complementarity among Levant Countries in 2001, 2010 and 2013

		Importer					
		Egypt	Iraq	Jordan	Lebanon	Syria	Turkey
Exporter	Egypt		30%	40%	40%	30%	40%
			40%	50%	40%	40%	40%
			40%	50%	40%	40%	40%
	Iraq	0%		10%	0%	0%	10%
		0%		10%	0%	0%	10%
		10%		10%	0%	0%	0%
	Jordan	40%	30%		50%	40%	40%
		30%	40%		40%	30%	30%
		30%	40%		40%	30%	30%
	Lebanon	30%	30%	30%		30%	30%
		30%	40%	30%		30%	30%
		40%	40%	40%		40%	40%
	Syria	30%	10%	30%	20%		30%
		30%	40%	40%	40%		30%
		40%	50%	50%	50%		30%
	Turkey	40%	40%	40%	50%	40%	
		50%	60%	50%	50%	50%	
		50%	60%	50%	50%	50%	

Note: The top number for 2001, middle number for 2010, bottom number for 2013. For an explanation of how Trade Complementarity Index is calculated see: World Bank Group, 2014, "Over the Horizon: A New Levant", Report No. 86946-IQ. Source of Data: United Nations UNCTAD database.

The values of TCI index for Levant countries in 2001, 2010 and 2013 are reported in Table 1. The TCI index ranges from 0 (no complementarity) to 100 (full complementarity) and the figures in Table 1 are high enough to promote and sustain trade among Levant countries. All Levant countries with the exception of Iraq have TCI indexes in the 30% to 60% range in 2010 and 2013. Turkey stands out as an exporter with 50% or higher TCI values with all other Levant countries. The compatibility of Turkey's exports with the import structure of other Levant countries provided the country with a strong economic incentive to promote trade relations with the Levant.

Comparing the 2001 and 2010 scores, we observe that for many pairs of trade partners, the trade complementarity increased during this period. This increase shows that Levantine economies took advantage of trade opportunities with one another and directed a larger share of their export products toward other Levant countries. Furthermore, comparing the 2010 and 2013 values, we also observe that despite the uprising and civil war in Syria the trade complementarity of Levant countries has not diminished.

A World Bank 2014 report on the Levant economies demonstrated that the average TCI score of Levant countries in 2001 was comparable to the average TCI score of the six founding members of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957,.[11] While the TCI scores in Table 1 differ from the 2014 World Bank Report and do not show that the Levant Economies had similar TCI scores in 2001 as EEC countries had in 1997, the average score of Levant countries in 2010 is close to the EEC average in 1957 of 51.[12] At

(11) See World Bank Group, "Over the Horizon: A New Levant", Report No 86946-IQ, 2014, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/594261468261275050/pdf/889500ESW0whit0x385254B00OUO0900ACS.pdf (Accessed 15 November 2017), p. xix.

(12) The World Bank report authors used a different formula for calculation of TCI. The figures that appear in Table 1 come directly from the UNCTAD database.

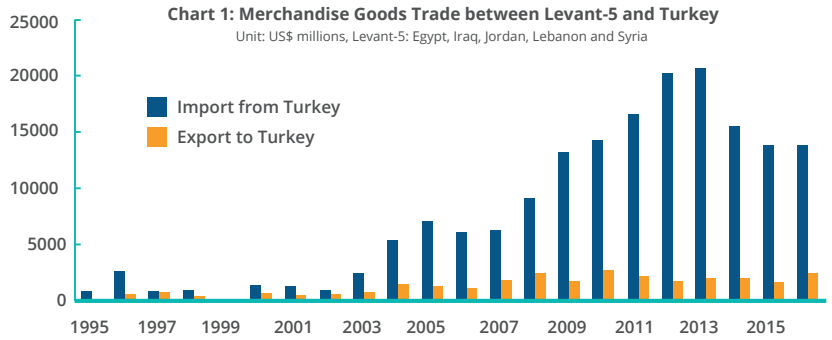
the same time the Levant TCI scores show less trade compatibility than do the scores for European Union members and the Eastern European countries that joined the EU soon after the collapse of the former Soviet Union.[13]

The trade compatibility of Levant countries is rooted in the fact that they are at different stages of industrialization and that there exists a sufficient difference in their labor costs to give each one of them a comparative advantage in the production of specific categories of export products. For example, Syria and Iraq have low labor costs and produce low-tech and petrochemical based export products, while Jordan, Egypt and Turkey have reached a higher stage of industrialization and are exporting more advanced manufactured products. Lebanon and Turkey also enjoy a comparative advantage in agricultural products.

Trade Flows among Levant Countries

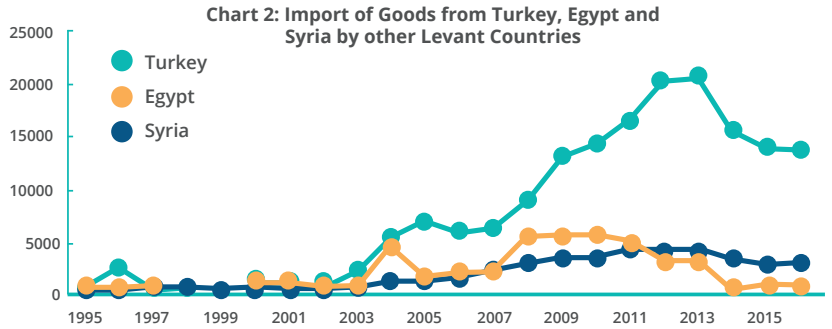
Before 2002, the volume of intra-Levant trade was very small. The Arab members not only did not trade much with Turkey, but they also had limited trade among themselves. After 2002 we observe an increase in bilateral trade among all Levant nations, with Turkey serving as the main trade engine for the region. As demonstrated in Chart 1, the volume of Turkish exports to Levant countries grew rapidly after 2002 and the upward trend continued until 2012.

(13) The Eastern enlargement of the European Union in 2004 approved the admission of Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovak Republic. The average TCI score for trade between these countries and existing EU members was 61. See World Bank Group, "Over the Horizon", p. xix.



Source of data: The United Nations, UNCTAD database.

In Chart 1, we also notice that Turkish imports from the Levant countries were much smaller than its exports. The low volume of Turkish imports, however, ignores the informal border trade that includes considerable qu ties of unrecorded crude oil imports from northern Iraq and Syria.[14]

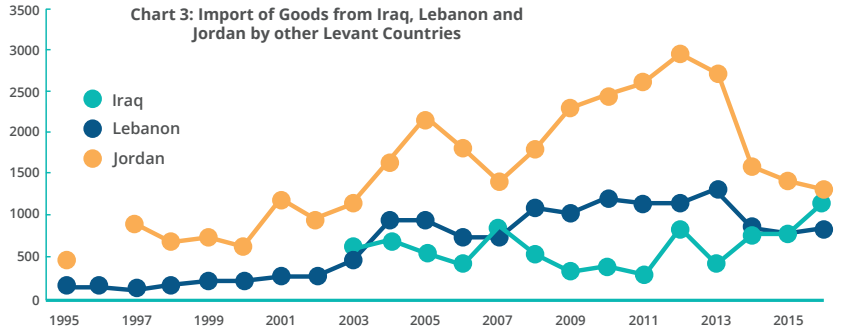


Source of data: The United Nations, UNCTAD database.

(14) For an account of cross-border smuggling between Turkey and rebel-held areas of northern Syria see Basma Atassi, "Syria Smuggling 'Getting Out of Hand' ", Al Jazeera, 23 April 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/04/201342893919660254.html (Accessed 13 November 2017).

As demonstrated in Charts 2 and 3, all of the Levant countries with the exception of Iraq increased their imports of goods from other Levant countries between 2002 and 2010. Purchases of crude oil and oil products from Iraq dominated the imports of Turkey and Jordan, representing the main cause for the sharp increase in imports for these two countries during this period.[15] These charts also show the decline in intra-Levant imports after 2012. After 2010, we observe a downtrend in intra-Levant imports from all Levant countries with the exception of Iraq. The decline is particularly significant in the value of imports from Syria.

In 2016, the value of imports from Syria was less than 25% of 2010 levels for the Levant countries, with the sole exception being Lebanon. Even the comparable figure for Lebanon was 48%, evidence of a significant decline.



Source of data: The United Nations, UNCTAD database.

(15) "Neighbourly ties: Trade and investment between Jordan and Iraq are Growing", in Oxford Business Group, The Report: Jordan 2012, https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/analysis/neighbourly-ties-trade-and-investment-between-jordan-and-iraq-are-growing (Accessed 26 February 2018).

During 2000 to 2010, the imports of Levant countries from other members not only increased in absolute value, but they also raised as a share of total imports, as demonstrated on Table 2. Not surprisingly the largest growth is reported for Turkey for which the Levant's share of Turkey's total imports rose from 2.6% in 2000 to 7.7% in 2010 and 8.6% in 2012.

Table 2: Imports from Levant as a Share of Total Imports of Goods

	1995	2000	2005	2010	2012	2014	2015	2016
Egypt	3.2%	4.2%	6.1%	6.6%	5.8%	4.8%	4.5%	5.3%
Iraq			2.4%	0.9%	1.5%	1.4%	1.9%	3.0%
Jordan	13.0%	13.7%	21.0%	16.2%	14.3%	7.0%	7.0%	6.9%
Lebanon	1.9%	3.3%	10.0%	6.8%	5.4%	4.1%	4.3%	4.6%
Syria	13.5%	28.4%	15.3%	33.2%	47.1%	10.6%	23.9%	25.9%
Turkey	2.5%	2.6%	6.1%	7.7%	8.6%	6.4%	6.7%	7.0%

Source of trade data: United Nations, UNCTAD data base. Ratios calculated by author.

Intra-Levant trade makes up a much more significant share of Syria and Jordan's total trade volume than it does for the other four Levant economies. As demonstrated in Table 2, imports from Levant partners accounted for 16.2% of total imports for Jordan and 32.2% for Syria in 2010. This share for the other four countries was under 8% and, in the other extreme, Iraq has consistently sourced the lowest share of its total merchandise imports from the Levant (under 3% in every year.) However, this low ratio can partly be explained by Iraq's large volume of informal and undocumented trade with neighbors that do not appear in the country's official trade statistics in the UNCTAD database.

The impact of Syria's civil war and ongoing geopolitical tensions on volume of trade among Levant countries are also visible in Table 2. We observe a downward trend after 2011 in the relative share of imports from the Levant for all of the region's countries other than Iraq. One visible consequence of these developments was the suspension of the

Levant Quartet agreement that was signed in 2010.[16] Had this agreement remained in effect it would have promoted a significant increase in the trade of both goods and services among member states. There were also plans to invite several more Arab states to join the quartet and create a large regional free trade agreement similar to the European Union.[17]

Arab Spring and the Decline of the Intra-Levant Economic Relations

The civil war in Syria and Turkey's response to the Arab Spring uprisings had an adverse effect on intra-Levant economic activities. Turkey benefited from remaining neutral during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 and was able to expand economic relations with both countries. Turkey's exports to both countries grew substantially during the war as Turkey was a key regional source of supplies for the warring countries[18] However, Turkey did not maintain this neutrality after the Arab Spring uprisings. Instead of remaining neutral with respect to political shifts in Egypt during 2011-2014, President Erdoğan took side with President Mohammad Morsi who was forcefully removed from power by the Egyptian Army.[19]

(16) For a detailed analysis of Levant Quartet agreement see World Bank, Over the horizon: A new Levant (English), Washington, D.C., World Bank Group, 2014, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/594261468261275050/Over-the-horizon-a-new-levant (Accessed 12 October 2017).

(17) Gökhan Kurtaran, "Mediterranean Quartet Taking Step toward Union, Says Syrian Minister", Hürriyet Daily News, 3 December 2010.

(18) For a detailed account of Turkey's economic gains see Elliot Hentov, "The ostensible 'silent victor'? The long-term impact of Iran-Iraq war on Turkey", in Nigel Ashton and Bryan Gibson (eds.), The Iran-Iraq War: New International Perspectives, New York, Routledge, 2013.

(19) Thoma Seibert, "Turkey's support for Morsi jeopardizes ties with Egypt", The National, 28 July 2013, https://www.thenational.ae/uae/turkey-s-support-for-morsi-jeopardises-ties-with-egypt-1.455255 (Accessed 28 February 2013).

Similarly, in Syria, Turkey sided with the multiple rebel forces that fought against Bashar Al-Assad's regime. This deviation from neutrality reduced the prospects for further promotion of intra-Levant trade. Turkish exports to Egypt enjoyed a sharp increase in 2012, in light of good diplomatic relations with the government of President Morsi, but settled at a lower level after he was removed from power. An even sharper decline was recorded in Turkey's exports to Syria after that country's civil war began in 2012.[20]

The Civil War in Syria changed the nature of trade between Syria and its neighbors, particularly Turkey. Yet it did not eliminate trade altogether (See Chart 4). Turkey's exports of goods to Syria declined dramatically in 2012, but recovered in 2013 and 2014. Furthermore, the Turkish products were not consumed exclusively in rebel-controlled areas. Although most were sold in the opposition-held territories, some Turkish products found their way into Damascus and other cities that were under the control of the Al-Assad regime.[21] The composition of Turkey's exports to Syria also changed after the civil war. Consumer goods would become a larger share of exports and the geographic source of exports shifted from the Istanbul-Ankara industrial region to Gaziantep, Hatay, Adana and Mersin in the south. These southern regions' share of Turkey's total exports to Syria rose from 20% to 60%.[22]

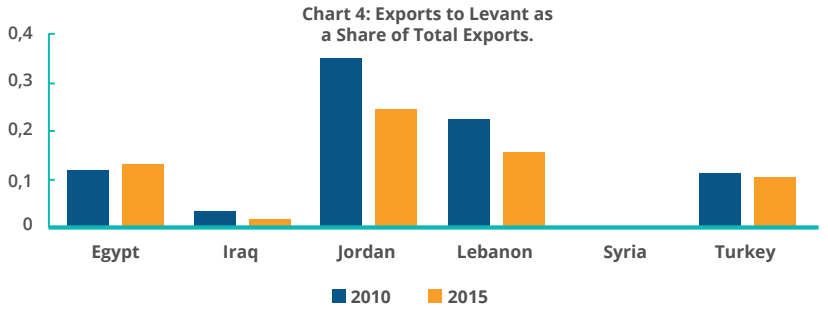
Another important dimension of Turkey's economic relations with fragmented Syria is its trade relationships with the regions that are controlled by the anti-Assad opposition groups in northern Syria, such as the Al-Nusra Front. Turkey is the main external trade partner for these regions. Furthermore, some Western research institutions as well as the

(20) Based on Turkey's trade statistics with Egypt and Syria as reported by the United Nations, UNCTAD database, http://unctad.org/en/Pages/statistics.aspx (Accessed 12 November 2017)

(21) Samir Aita, "Trade Without Religion between Turkey and Syria", Éditoriaux de l'Ifri, 24 March 2017.

(22) Ibid, Figure 4.

Russian government have accused Turkey of allowing the Islamic State (ISIS) to sell oil to private and clandestine buyers in Turkey who facilitated its transportation across the Turkey-Syria border between 2014 and 2016.[23] During this interval, ISIS controlled several oil fields in Iraq and Syria. According to one study by a Western institution, local business owners in southern Turkey purchased this crude oil in small quantities from ISIS-controlled fields, and then solid it to intermediaries for domestic (Turkish) refineries or for export.[24]



Source of data: United Nations, UNCTAD data base. Shares calculated by author.

(23) "Russia Unveils 'proof' Turkey's Erdogan is smuggling Isis Oil across border from Syria", Independent, 4 December 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-releases-proof-turkey-is-smuggling-isis-oil-over-its-border-a6757651.html (Accessed 18 November 2017).

(24) George Kiourktsoglou and Alec D. Coutroubis, "Isis Export Gatway to Global Crude Oil Markets", London Shipping Law Centre, Maritime Business Forum, 12 March 2015, http://cibal.eu/occasional-papers/4801-ocasional-papers-231-2015-isis-export-gateway-to-global-crude-oil-markets (Accessed 10 October 2017).

Prospects for the Future

Prospects for economic cooperation among Levant countries remain uncertain and will depend on several geopolitical developments that affect most of these countries. The most important uncertain factor is the emerging political order in Syria. While the risk of a complete regime collapse in Syria has diminished as a result of Russian and Iranian support, the country remains fragmented and the central government controls only a portion of the country. While the Al-Assad regime and the U.S. supported forces made significant gains against the Islamic State, the tensions between these two factions have intensified.[25] Furthermore, Syria is still a major battleground in the Iran-Saudi proxy war. As a result, it is possible to envision several future geopolitical outcomes for Syria and the prospects for Levant economic cooperation will be different under each scenario.

In a 2017 analysis, Meijnders, Lein and Mierlo presented four scenarios for Syria on two dimensions: fragmentation and violence.[26] These scenarios are displayed in Table 3. The four scenarios envisioned are Fragile Peace, Reconquesta, Warlordism and Frozen Conflict. If all factions in Syria agree on a political solution, the Fragile Peace Scenario will prevail. The country will remain united under a central government in Damascus but some regions such as the Kurdish areas will enjoy considerable autonomy. In this scenario the central government will most likely adopt a liberal trade regime because of the difficulty in obtaining consensus for strong trade regulations.

(25) Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, "As ISIS' Role in Syria Wanes, Other Conflicts Take the Stage", New York Times, 19 October 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/world/middleeast/isis-syria-war.html, (Accessed 1 March 2018).

(26) Minke Meijnders, Jair Van der Lijn and Bas Von Mierlo, "Syria in 2019: Four Scenarios – Implications for Policy Planning", Clingendael Report, November 2017, https://www.clingendael.org/publication/syria-2019-four-scenarios (Accessed 18 November 2017).

Table 3: Four Scenarios for Political Developments in Syria

		Intensity of Violence	
		Low	High
Fragmentation	Fragmented Government	**Frozen Conflict** Low intensity violence, Fragmented Governance, Syria partitioned into several statelets with no effective central authority over the entire country.	**Warlordism** High Intensity Violence, Fragmented governance, Syria partitioned into fiefdoms.
	Centralized Government	**Fragile Peace** Negotiated peace, Regional autonomy, A stable central government with limited powers.	**Reconquesta** Assad regime dominates all or most of Syria, Fragmented/weak opposition, Frequent terrorist attacks and bombings.

Source: The four scenarios described in the table are borrowed from Meijnders et.al. (2017). Table generated by author. Meijnders, Minke, Jair Van der Lijn and Bas Von Mierlo. "Syria in 2019: Four Scenarios –Implications for Policy Planning", Clingendael Report, November 2017, https://www.clingendael.org/publication/syria-2019-four-scenarios (Accessed 18 November 2017).

In a way, this political system will resemble the fragile coalition governments in Lebanon and Iraq. The constitution of Iraq after the 2003 U.S. occupation limited the powers of the central government in an attempt to prevent the Shiite majority from dominating the political scene at the expense of the Kurds and Sunni Arabs.[27] An unintended consequence of Iraq's weak central government has been country's imposition of a liberal trade and investment regime, which has kept the legal barriers to trade low and allowed the Kurdish regional government to enjoy considerable autonomy over trade and economic policies.[28]

A fragile peace scenario in Syria will most likely grant a limited amount of autonomy to the Kurdish region of the country and minimum constitutional guarantees of political power for the Sunni and Alawi sects. The United Arab Emirates is another Middle Eastern country that operates as a decentralized federation with considerable devolution of control over trade and economic policies to the ruling authorities in its seven emirates. If Syria can adopt such a decentralized federal system, it will be in a better

(27) Cory Kopitzke, "Realizing an Opportunity: Limiting the Power of the Executive in the Iraqi Constitution," Indiana Journal of Constitutional Design, Vol. 2, 2017, http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ijcd/vol2/iss1/3 (Accessed 18 February 2018).

(28) The central government in Baghdad gained more control after the failed Kurdish referendum in September 2017.

position to restore trade and investment relations with other the other countries of the Levant. The reconstruction opportunities in that country will create many opportunities for Syria's economic partners in the Levant, particularly Turkey.

Under the Reconquista Scenario, the Al-Assad regime will capture all or a significant portion of Syria with the support of Russia and its regional allies.[29] The regime will then be able to impose a stable political order by force. The country will return to normalcy but opposition forces will receive external support to engage in bombing and terrorist activities with an intensity that might resemble Iraq during 2006-2017. These acts of terror will not topple the government but will increase the political and security risks for foreign investors.

Under this scenario, the central government will have full control over trade policy and will direct Syria's trade and investment opportunities toward the countries that supported it during the civil war.[30] This means that Syria will favor Lebanon and Iraq among its Levant neighbors and will restrict economic relations with Turkey, at least for a few years, until Syria-Turkey relations are normalized. Nevertheless, Turkish products are likely to find their way into the Syrian market indirectly through an informal border trade and via Lebanon.[31] The recent refusal of Egypt to support the Saudi insistence on the removal of the Al-Assad regime might also be viewed positively by the Al-Assad government.[32]

(29) See Meijnders et al., "Syria in 2019".

(30) Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Syrian Reconstruction Spells Juicy Contracts for Russia, Iranian Firms", Foreign Policy, 20 October 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/20/syrian-reconstruction-spells-juicy-contracts-for-russian-iranian-firms-china-civil-war/ (Accessed 14 February 2018).

(31) During the Syria's civil war years, many Turkish consumer goods and food items found their way into government-held territories despite Turkish support for anti Al-Assad forces. See Aita, "Trade without Religion between Turkey and Syria.

(32) Elissa Miller, "Understanding Recent Egypt-Saudi Tensions", Atlantic Council, 26 October 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/understanding-recent-egypt-saudi-tensions (Accessed 8 November 2017).

Under the remaining two scenarios, Warlordism and Frozen Conflict, Syria will not be governed by a central government and instead it will be carved up into autonomous statelets that will not be at war with each other but will observe a ceasefire without political unity. The situation under Warlordism will resemble the post-Ghadafi Libya and might gradually evolve into a Frozen Conflict scenario as a result of external mediation.[33] A fragmented Syria will pose both challenges and opportunities for trade relations with its Levant neighbors. The small statelets that will emerge under this scenario will have no choice but to develop cross-border economic ties with other countries in the region. As a result, they will develop an economic dependency on that neighbor. At the same time the political risks and the unstable nature of this scenario will discourage long-term investments and economic strategies until the point where the country either reaches a political solution or that the frozen conflict scenario appears permanent. Furthermore, the international community is unlikely to commit any substantial resources to Syria beyond humanitarian aid under if the country were to experience the Warlordism Scenario.

The ongoing regional rivalries in the Levant among Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, plus intense interventions by external powers, can have a destabilizing effect on Iraq and Lebanon as well. Both countries are likely to remain vulnerable to the Iran-Saudi proxy wars as well as to the U.S.-Saudi-Israeli efforts to reduce Iran's influence in the Middle East. The interventions of these external actors will intensify factional disputes and lead to further political instability. Political instability and security risks, in turn, will reduce the region's potential for formal economic engagement at the regional level. If the national governments of these countries remain weak and become less effective as a result of factional politics, their foreign trade patterns are likely to resemble Syria under the Fragile Peace Scenario.

(33) These two scenarios are also explained in more detail in Meijnder et al., "Syria in 2019".

Centrifugal Tendencies

Another important factor for assessing the Levant region's potential for economic cooperation is the opportunities that some Levant countries will have for economic relations with countries outside of the region. For both economic and geopolitical reasons, each Levant country might be attracted to other economic partners such as the European Union, the U.S., the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Iran, or China. Intra-Levant economic cooperation will have to compete with these strong centrifugal forces as well.

To start with, these extra-Levant powers already represent the main trade partners for Levant countries, and any effort to expand intra-Levant trade will face strong competition from these established trade and investment links. China for example offers a wide range of manufactured goods at competitive prices and it has proactively reached out to Syrian officials expressing a willingness to play an active role in the county's reconstruction.[34] China has also been very proactive in seeking investment opportunities in other Levant countries. Similarly, Iran has purchased large amounts of land that is suitable for both agriculture and manufacturing production sites in Syria, in exchange for its military and economic aid to the Syrian regime.[35] These purchases, and the ongoing reliance of the Al-Assad regime on Iran, will increase Iran-Syria economic relations. In other Levant countries, such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, we observe a strong economic connection with the GCC countries. These economic connections have endured despite periodic geopolitical tensions.

(34) Robert W. Anderson, "Chinese Companies poised to Help Rebuild War-torn Syria, Asia Times, 19 December 2017, http://www.atimes.com/article/chinese-companies-poised-help-rebuild-war-torn-syria/ (Accessed 17 February 2018).

(35) "New Page in Iran-Syria economic relations", Financial Tribune, 21 January 2017, https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-business-and-markets/57826/new-page-in-iran-syria-economic-relations (Accessed 24 February 2018).

Restoring economic cooperation among Levant countries must account for each country's current membership in other trade agreements and custom unions. Membership in multiple trade agreements might lead to an inconsistency in trade. Jordan has a preferential trade agreement with the United States while Turkey has customs union agreement with the European Union. Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt are members of the Euro-Med trade agreement. All Arab Levant countries belong to the Pan-Arab Free Trade Agreement (PAFTA) and finally, Egypt and Jordan are members of the Agadir agreement with Morocco and Tunisia. Membership in these agreements limits the tariff concessions that Levant countries could offer to each other in a future intra-Levant free trade agreement. Turkey for example has to maintain a minimum import tariff on manufactured goods from non-EU countries in order to comply with its customs union agreement with EU.[36]

Economic cooperation among Levant countries can promote stronger trade and economic relations by removing non-tariff barriers (NTB) such as border closing delays, complicated customs regulations, and restrictive safety standards, which often serve as indirect trade barriers against imports. These NTBs are currently a major burden on intra-Levant trade.

(36) Subidey Togan, "The EU-Turkey Customs Union: A Model for Future Euro-MED Integration", MEDPRO Technical Report No 9, Brussels, European Commission, March 2012.

Who will lead the Levant Economic Integration Initiative?

During the 2002-2010 period, Turkey played a leadership role in the expansion of economic relations among the Levant countries. This leadership included a willingness of the AKP government to reduce diplomatic tensions and water disputes with Syria in addition to launching an intense diplomatic effort to negotiate trade agreements and facilitate economic relations between business communities in Turkey and those in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Another contributing factor was the increasing personal contacts between Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan and Syria's leader Bashar Al-Assad. In 2010, they jointly supported the creation of the Levant Quartet as a multi-lateral agreement among Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria for the promotion of economic and cultural exchange.[37] Had it not been for the massive disruptions caused by the Arab Spring uprisings, this agreement would have paved the way for a further deepening of Levantine economic integration.

The current tensions between the Al-Assad regime and Turkey will make it near impossible for the latter to play a similar leadership role to revive the Levant Quartet. Furthermore, the coalition government in Lebanon, which includes a strong representation of Hezbollah, will not be able to develop strong formal economic ties with Turkey as long as the tensions between Turkey and Syria continue. Hence overall, it is unlikely that any Levant country will play the effective leadership role necessary to drive Levantine economic integration, at least until there is a rapprochement between Syria and Turkey.

(37) Gökhan Kurtaran, "Mediterranean quartet taking step toward union, says Syrian minister" Hurriyet Daily News, 3 December 2010.

Instead, it is more likely that the economic relations among Levant countries will develop on a bilateral basis without any multilateral coordination. The Turkey-Egypt relations, for example, have recovered in recent years after a decline in 2013-2014. These two large economies have many trade complementarities and their business communities have a strong bond that will serve as a catalyst for stronger economic links. Even during the 2013 and 2014, years of diplomatic tension between President Sisi and President Erdoğan, private sector trade and investment relations between the two countries continued.

An important facilitator of intra-Levant trade in the coming years might be the presence of large Syrian refugee/immigrant population in other Levant countries, which can create an ethnic trade network throughout the region. One of the tragic consequences of the Syrian civil war is that approximately 5.4 million Syrians have taken refuge in other countries, with large concentrations in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.[38] There are also smaller Syrian refugee communities in Iraq and Egypt. While some of these refugees will eventually return to Syria if the situation were to improve, a portion are likely to stay and establish roots in host countries. Similar to how a network of Lebanese immigrants around the world have developed a strong trade network with one another and with Lebanon,[39] the Syrian refugees/immigrants are also likely to develop a similar trade network throughout the Levant. Since trade and investment in high risk and uncertain environments faces considerable transaction costs, ethnic networks play an important role in creating trust and long-term trade relationships. In this context, the Syrian refugees can help promote closer economic ties among Levant countries, particularly with Syria.

(38) Based on the United Nations refugee statistics, as of April 2018, there were 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, 987,000 in Lebanon and 662,000 in Jordan. See http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php (Accessed 15 May 2018).

(39) Guita Hourani, "Lebanese Diaspora and Homeland Relations", Working Paper, The Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Program, Cairo, The American University in Cairo, 2007.

One of the benefits of economic integration is that it can increase the prospects for a peaceful coexistence between countries that have had a history of war and animosity, as is the case in the Levant. The best example of this effect is positive role that economic integration of Western Europe after World War II played in promotion of peace and political stability in that region. In the Levant, the nature and character of the ruling governments will affect the prospects for economic integration but the international community can offer economic incentives to the political elite to promote intra-Levant cooperation. In parliamentary democracies, pro-trade economic interests will lobby for regional economic integration. In paternalistic democracies and guided democracies it is the preferences of the political elite that will dictate economic relations among neighbors.[40]

Conclusion

Overall, based on the economic and political conditions of the region, the six Levant countries that we have analyzed are not currently prepared for a deep multi-lateral trade and investment agreement. According to Balassa's classic work on the theory of economic integration, there are four categories of integration. Free trade areas represent the lowest level of integration with reduced barriers to trade but no additional harmonization of economic policy. Higher orders of integration are identified as customs unions, common markets, and economic unions.[41] Under the most optimistic geopolitical scenarios in the Levant, the most that can be accomplished as a multilateral agreement is a weak free trade agreement with many restrictions and exceptions.

(40) Mustafa Aydın and Damla Aras, "Political Conditionality of Economic Relations between Paternalistic States: Turkey's Interactions with Iran, Iraq and Syria", Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. 27 (1 & 2), Winter/Spring 2005, pp. 21-43.

(41) Bela Balassa, The Theory of Economic Integration, (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, Irwin Series in Economics, 1961).

The most that can be hoped for, guided by more realistic assumptions on the future security and political conditions in Syria, is a collection of bilateral economic agreements. It is also possible to imagine that some Levant countries (for example Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan) might sign a multi-lateral agreement that leaves the door open for Syria and Iraq to apply for membership at a later date. The limited economic cooperation that emerged during 2002-2010 is a clear indication that the region has the potential to move toward economic integration and that there exists political elites in every Levant country that support closer regional economic ties. The signing of the Levant Quartet agreement among Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria was an important step towards regional economic integration but was interrupted by the 2011 uprisings. Nevertheless, it was an important achievement that can serve as a model and a starting point for future efforts towards a greater economic integration of the Levant.

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Challenges of Demographic Pressures and Resource Scarcity for Political Economy in the Levant and MENA Region

Özlem Tür

Introduction

Back in 1995, Alan Richards warned us about an overemphasis on conflict and wars in the Middle East. While the region has undoubtedly witnessed many conflicts, interventions and civil strife, as Richards argues, "there is a quieter, deeper source of instability - mounting economic problems". The Middle East has been falling behind other regions with its "inability to curb population growth", which has produced a youth bulge, engendering "a rising tide of young people seeking jobs". As the population increases, there is "a quietly increasing challenge to acquire adequate food", thus the region "cannot feed itself; food dependency will grow in the near future, as the water constraint binds more tightly". Richards further argues that, "there is a way out" and is rather straightforward as "technocrats know what to do". Yet, the problem lies with the leaders/states as they "lack the will and the skill to pull it off. Weak political systems may well deliver 'too little, too late.' "[1]

(1) Alan Richards, "Economic Roots of Instability in the Middle East", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 4 (1-2), 1995, p. 175.

This paper aims to address these challenges — that of population growth and resource scarcity in the Levant and also adds the environmental challenges as a multiplying factor, and argues that despite many studies that call for immediate attention and action, the region suffers from a lack of political will in tackling these problems.[2] Trying to grapple with hard security issues, bread and butter issues are often of secondary concern. Yet, as the human security concerns are neglected, the stability in the region is at higher risk.

When the Arab uprisings began in Tunisia and spread to Egypt and beyond by the end of 2010, many analysts rushed to talk about population growth, unemployment, increasing food prices and the ensuing inequality in the region. One of the core discussions since then has been how the radical republics of the region, shaking up with demands for change are unable to respond to the growing challenges. The Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) of 2009 highlighted how the human security or lack of it in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region constituted an important watershed in these discussions.[3] The report argued that "the trend in the region has been to focus more on the security of the state than on the security of the people" and called for a new approach that focused on the "human as the main agent". In a way, as mentioned in the beginning of this paper, parallel to what Richards was arguing more than a decade ago, the report criticized the emphasis on the traditional conception of security and underlined that such an emphasis "led to missed opportunities to ensure the security of the human person". Thus, what is faced in the region resulted in "an all-too-common sense of limited opportunities and personal insecurity, witnessed in the world's highest

(2) The paper mainly deals with the Arab countries of the Levant - Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Occupied Territories, and excludes a detailed analysis of Israel and Turkey.

(3) *Arab Human Development Report 2009 – Challenges for Human Security in the Arab Region*, New York, UNDP, 2009.

levels of unemployment, deep and contentious patterns of exclusion".[4] As is underlined in the report, for decades the Arab citizen, suffered from seven dimensions of threat: 1) People and their insecure environment; 2) The State and its insecure people; 3) The vulnerability of those lost from sight; 4) Volatile growth, high unemployment and persisting poverty; 5) Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity; 6) Health security challenges; and 7) Occupation and military interventions.[5]

The inability to respond to these concerns thus lies at the heart of the uprisings. Yet, as will be argued below, why the uprisings happened at the moment they did, by the end of 2010, and not before has a great deal to do with the Arab state and its regime survival priorities. The demonstration of frustration among the young "middle class poor", whose hopes for a better future were dashed due to the inability and unwillingness of the states to respond to these challenges for decades, is important to discuss in this context. As a demonstration of the importance of this fact, as will be discussed below, the AHDR of 2016 focuses on the youth population. Yet, to what extent the points underlined in the Report will be taken into account and will help the Arab states to overcome their survival priorities and act on the youth problems is altogether another question.

Demographic Pressure

The region hosts one of the fastest growing populations of the world. High fertility rates in the Arab world in general (six children per women in the 1980s) have produced a youth bulge between the ages of 15 and 24. One of the most striking characteristics of the MENA, no doubt, has been its rapid population growth. In four decades population numbers have more than quadrupled, rising from 124 million in 1970 and reaching 350 million.. By 2050 the population of MENA is expected to reach around 600 million, 685 million in 2070 and 845 million in 2100 according to United Nations medium-fertility scenario. What is also important to note is that the share of the youth in the population in 2010 was 27.9 percent.[6] The number of youth is expected to rise to 100 million by 2035.[7] In the high-fertility scenario, MENA's population is expected to double by 2080, which together with projected climate impacts, puts the resources of the region, especially water and land, under enormous pressure as it will be coupled with the high existing pressure to create new employment opportunities.

Rapid population growth is challenging enough for countries, but when the shares of certain population groups within states grow more rapidly than others, a so-called "differential fertility", the issue becomes even more challenging. Most countries of the Levant are composed of critical minorities as well as limitations on certain groups' access to political power. Changing population dynamics, one group growing more than the others, complicates the political and social dynamics. The Alawite minority in Syria, the Shi'a and the Kurds in Iraq, the secular/orthodox divide in Israel, rapid population growth in the Occupied Palestinian Territories as well as the population ratios of East Bankers in Jordan are critical. According to the recently released figures by the Israel Bureau of Statistics, there is "a massive rise in birth rates in the Jewish state."[8]

(4) Ibid., p. V.

(5) Ibid, pp. 2-15.

(6) *Arab Human Development Report 2016 – Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality*, New York, UNDP, 2016, p. 15

(7) Ragui Assaad and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, "Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: Demographic Opportunity or Challenge", Washington, Population Reference Bureau, April 2007, p. 3. *https://assets.prb.org/pdf07/YouthinMENA.pdf* (Accessed 8 March 2018)

(8) "Israeli Birth Rates on the Rise", *Israel Today*, 14 March 2018, http://www.israeltoday.co.il/NewsItem/tabid/178/nid/33572/Default.aspx (Accessed 20 March 2018).

Accordingly, 181,405 babies were born in Israel in 2016, showing "a 92 percent increase over the number of babies born in 1980. Of those babies, 73.9 percent were born to Jewish women, and 23.3 percent to Arab women."[9] Considering that the birth rate is higher especially among the ultra-Orthodox Jews, who have low participation in the work force, this stands as a divisive issue for the future of the society, as well as a constraint on economic growth.[10] However challenging these population changes may be, none of these cases pose as important of a threat to stability as does the case of Lebanon. The confessional system established in Lebanon is based on the 1932 census, which determined the Maronite community as the majority.[11] Since then, although the population ratios are considered to have radically changed, no other census has been conducted. The Shi'a population has grown considerably and is thought to constitute a majority in the country, yet a parallel change in the system is not permitted.[12] The emergence of the Amal movement in 1970s, as the Movement of the Dispossessed, was an attempt to change this, while the popularity of Hezbollah from 1980s is also related to this fact. In addition to general challenges that a growing population poses for the states, differential changes, when combined with lack of political opportunities and change, creates a suitable environment for more radical movements to grow, deepening the fragility of the state. When thinking about population growth, this aspect is also especially pressing for the Levant countries.

(9) Ibid.

(10) Tova Cohen, "Israel has the highest birth rate in the developed world, and that's becoming a problem", *Reuters,* 25 September 2015, http://www.businessinsider.com/israel-has-the-highest-birth-rate-in-the-developed-world-and-thats-becoming-a-problem-2015-9 (Accessed 7 February 2018).

(11) For a discussion on the 1932 census and its significance see Rania Maktabi, "The Lebanese Census of 1932 Revisited. Who are the Lebanese?", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 26 (2), 1999, pp. 219-241.

(12) For a discussion on the changing ratios of different sects, see William Harris, *The New Face of Lebanon – History's Revenge*, Princeton, NJ, Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006, pp. 67-76.

Growing Youth Bulge and Unemployment

As is often underlined, one of the most important characteristics of the region is its young population — that is the youth bulge — that constitutes the fastest growing segment of the Arab population.[13] Around 60 percent of the population is considered to be less than 25 years of age, making the region one of the most youthful regions in the world, with a median age of 22 years, compared to a global average of 28.5. As the UN Report of 2011 argued, although such a large number of youth "could become the backbone of strong economies and a vibrant future if they had the right education, skills, and job opportunities", they are challenged with a lack of opportunities and high unemployment.[14] In line with what Richards and Waterbury argue, population growth has "retarded the development process and stressed the polity" in the region.[15] One of the most important challenges, presented by the increasing population, is unemployment. According to International Labor Organization, youth unemployment is higher in the MENA region than in any other region of the world.[16] While the world average for unemployment is six percent and the youth unemployment is 12.6 percent, the numbers reach 10.2 percent for total unemployment and 27 percent for youth unemployment in the MENA and is highest among some of the Levant countries — Jordan, Lebanon and the Occupied Territories. As is presented in the table below, youth unemployment reaches 28 percent in Jordan and over 40 percent in

(13) For details see the United Nations Report by Farzaneh Roudi, *Youth Population and Employment in the Middle East and North Africa: Opportunity or Challenge*, United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Adolescents, Youth and Development, July 2011, http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/egm-adolescents/p06_roudi.pdf (Accessed 30 January 2108).

(14) Ibid.

(15) Alan Richards and John Waterbury (eds.), *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, 3rd ed., Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 2013, p. 72.

(16) International Labour Organization, "Global Employment Trends for Youth 2015 - MENA region retains highest youth unemployment rate in the world", 8 October 2015, http://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_412797/lang--en/index.htm (Accessed 30 January 2018).

the Occupied Palestinian Territories.[17] Rapid population growth requires states to "spend [more] money to create jobs", and creating entry-level jobs becomes especially challenging.

Table 1. Unemployment Rates in the MENA Region and the Levant Countries

Country	Year	Total Unemployment	Youth Unemployment
World	**2011**	**6**	**12.6**
MENA	**2011**	**10.2**	**27**
Syria	**2010**	**8.4**	**18.3**
Lebanon	**2007**	**9**	**22.1**
Jordan	**2010**	**12.5**	**28.1**
Occupied Territories	**2008**	**23.7**	**40.2**

Source: Mirkin, *"Arab Spring: Demographics in a Region in transition",* p. 23.

A look at the basic facts surrounding unemployment in the Levant — although there are differences between the countries — reveals four general and important aspects that are worth noting: First, unemployment is often greater in the cities than in the countryside; second, it mainly affects the youth; third, educated workers are more highly unemployed than uneducated ones; forth, unemployment rates for women exceed that of men.[18] The young population requires long-term investment in education and services before they can be economically productive, as well as a clean environment and sufficient resources to sustain them. As they complete their education (at different levels), the youth need jobs to sustain themselves and build families. Yet, this is not an easy task.

(17) Barry Mirkin, "Arab Spring Demographics in a Region in Transition", *Arab Human Development Report – Research Paper Series*, New York, UNDP, 2013, pp. 22-23.

(18) Ibid.

Asaf Bayat describes a "middle-class poor"[19] to refer to the region's educated youth and what Farhad Khosrokhavar calls a "would-be middle class"[20] reflects this phenomenon. The region hosts an important youth population that is well educated, connected with the outside world, and uses social media very effectively, but have little chance of being the future elite. As the Arab Human Development Report of 2016 underlines, during the 2000s, the region witnessed the highest level of skilled emigration in the world; as young people cannot find jobs, they look for suitable conditions elsewhere.[21] Those that stayed behind "being cut from the political and economic elite" faced a "constant feeling of anxiety" and frustration due to the lack of available qualified jobs. Despite being well educated, this group is mostly excluded from the labor market, political mechanisms and the countries' ruling coalition mostly because of the 'crony capitalism' prevalent in most of these countries. The developmentalist state model based on import substitution industrialization, adopted by the radical republics during the 1950s and 1960s created an overgrown state sector in the 'socialist' Arab Republics. Crumbling under the need for economic reform in the 1980s, these countries, rather than pursuing a full-scale reform, chose to adopt "selective liberalizations" that would enlarge the ruling coalition rather than bring about any future change.[22] Thus, the new elite who benefitted from the reforms were regime-friendly, loyal entrepreneurs that would serve the continuation of the regime and in return themselves. In this system, private investors who could link up with the state were

(19) Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2013.

(20) Farhad Khosrokhavar, *The New Arab Revolutions That Shook the World,* Boulder, London, Paradigm Publishers, 2012.

(21) *Arab Human Development Report 2016*, p. 27

(22) For this argument see Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: The Politics of Economic Liberalization", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 18 (2), 1997, pp. 249-265; Steven Heydemann, "The political logic of economic rationality: selective stabilization in Syria", in H. J. Barkey (ed.), *The Politics of Economic Reform in the Middle East*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1992, pp. 11-37.

presumably in a better position, making use of governmental licensing and often obtaining cheaper public sector inputs while supplying state-owned enterprises with 'favorably priced' inputs.[23]

There has been a strategic alliance between the state and this new elite as the "businessmen and bureaucrats have learned to manipulate economic policy to maximize personal benefit at the expense of national development"[24] and the governments were "hostage to the politically primordial need to generate and disseminate patronage".[25] For example, in the case of Syria, Sadowski puts it bluntly:

> Corporate bonds are supposed to pursue profits, not popularity and politicians are supposed to increase the public welfare, not their bank accounts. Patronage tends to violate this separation: It is the most 'economic' of political relationships...It is the inequality not the inefficiency of patronage that offends Syrians. If everyone had equal access to patronage few would complain.[26]

How Bashar Asad's regime has modernized its authoritarian outlook by relying more on crony capitalists and how this has led to a more durable regime with long-term costs is a point underlined by Hinnebusch.[27] As he emphasizes, at the heart of the regime coalition in Syria were "the 'crony capitalists', the rent-seeking alliances of political brokers (led by Asad's

(23) Nazih Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State*, New York, I. B Tauris, 1995 p. 345.

(24) Yahya Sadowski, *Political Vegetables? Businessmen and Bureaucrats in the: Development of Egyptian Aagriculture*, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution, 1991.

(25) Robert Springborg, "The Political Economy of the Arab Spring", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 16 (3), 2011, p. 432.

(26) Yahya Sadowski, "Baathists ethics and the Spirit of Satte Capitalism: Patronage and the Party in Contemporary Syria" in P. Chelkowski and R. J. Pranger (eds*.), Ideology and Power in the Middle East*, Durhamand and London, Duke University Press, 1988, pp. 168-69.

(27) Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: from 'authoritarian upgrading' to revolution?", *International Affairs*, Vol. 88 (1), 2012, pp. 101-102.

mother's family) and the regime supportive bourgeoisie". By creating and nurturing its "own" capitalists, the Syrian regime aimed to "survive the incremental transition to a partial market economy and since no significant business venture was possible without regime insiders taking a percentage, regime crony capitalists developed intimate partnerships with wider elements of the bourgeoisie".[28] It is interesting to see that it was this bourgeoisie, and not the Ba'ath Party, that funded Asad's 2007 re-election campaign. Although being more productive, the businessmen of Aleppo were less connected to the regime and therefore received less state benefit. How they managed to survive and triumph in this restrictive environment was thanks to the opening to Turkey. Other productive "medium-and small-scale capital was, however, marginalized and alienated".[29]

Without links to the state, the chances for businesses to survive are very small in the MENA region. The countries of the Levant are no exception. In this context, when new jobs are created, they are often earmarked for the families of loyal businessmen, not for ordinary citizens. It was this cronyism, according to Cammett and Diwan, which lied at the core of the feelings of inequality and frustration that triggered the Arab uprisings.[30]

(28) Ibid.

(29) Ibid.

(30) Melani Cammett and Ishac Diwan, "Conclusion: The Political Economy of the Arab Uprisings", Richards and Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East,* p. 414.

Youth Bulge, Social Instability and Conflict

In addition to economic challenges and unemployment problems, the youth bulge in the Arab countries, the Levant region being no exception, is seen as one of the main drivers of social instability and conflict.[31] But is there a direct linkage between population increase and security challenges? Do youth bulges create political violence and social conflict? Although this question has been discussed in the literature for long time, it has come back to the forefront since the Arab uprisings.

Moller, back in 1968, argued that the presence of a large number of adolescents and young adults is likely to influence the political affairs so as to generate violent conflicts.[32] There is a cause and effect relationship between such an increase and political instability. Mesquida and Weiner argue that it is particularly young men who engage in collective risk taking. The relative number of young males in a given population is likely to influence political affairs and to lead to collective violence. A population profile that is disproportionately young makes the occurrence of political violence extremely probable. Their conclusion is that the presence of a relatively large number of men makes coalitional aggression more probable, particularly when the resources needed to attract a mate are insufficiently available or poorly distributed.[33]

Stuck in between the lack of jobs and crony capitalists, the MENA youth have little hope for their future. It was this combination of a youth bulge, high employment and the feeling of frustration that moved young people to the streets in 2010/11. Their high education and social media networks

(31) For a general analysis that looks at the relationship between population growth and security see, Jack A. Goldstone, "Population and Security: How Demographic Change Can Lead to Violent Conflict", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 56 (1), Fall 2002, pp. 3-22.

(32) Herbert Moller, "Youth as a Force in the Modern World", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 10 (3), 1968 , pp. 237-260.

(33) Christian G. Mesquida and Neil I. Wiener, "Human collective aggression: A behavioral ecology perspective", *Ethology and Sociobiology*, Vol. 17, (4), July 1996, pp. 247-262.

made them highly equipped for the job market; yet their hopes for the future were limited. Although unemployment was high, economic growth was slow, and food prices were high, these were not new dynamics and had been present in the region for the past few decades. What explains the uprisings in this particular moment cannot be understood without the accumulated frustration based on a combination of economic factors as well as the closed regime coalitions.

Is There a Way Out for the Youth?

The Arab Human Development Report of 2016, titled *Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality,* propose a way out of the demographic pressure the region is experiencing. The report makes three important recommendations: "To enhance the basic capabilities of young people to allow them to realize their full potential"; "to widen the opportunities available to young people for self-fulfillment by providing suitable job opportunities, [...] enabling them to participate actively in government and public institutions"; and "to achieve peace and security and strengthen the role of youth".[34] The last objective seems the most improbable, as the region is in a constant state of conflict and the imminent danger of war is very high. The other two objectives do not seem adoptable in the short-term either, though the urgency is very clear considering the rapid population growth.

Although these recommendations call for states to make the necessary changes, in the Arab world in general "the state" with its regime survival reflexes seems to create more problems than solutions for the youth. Despite the existing challenges for the youth in the region, the adaptation of national youth policies or strategies is limited. Slow progress on the

(34) *Arab Human Development Report, 2016*, pp. 40-41.

matter is due to problems in implementation, both because there are coordination problems between the institutions that are involved in youth policies and because there is an unwillingness to work with the youth in policy-making processes. More clearly, the authoritarian nature of the state prevents any transparent, inclusive mechanisms of policy formulation; thus while maintaining the stability and security of the regime in the short-run, in the medium to long run will create greater risks and problems.

Growing Population and Resource Scarcity

As the population of the region rapidly increases, a scarcity of resources also becomes an important problem. One of the most urgent scarcities in the region is water, which also affects food security. The MENA region in general is an arid region with low precipitation rates. The 1990s often referred to the possibility of 'water wars' in the region, signaling the importance of the issue.[35] Considering the environmental problems caused by climate change, the amount of water in the Levant has been declining in recent years. Droughts, which dramatically affected Northern Syria and Iraq at the end of the 2000s, and which will be discussed below, are important to note. Considering the severity of the water scarcity, Richards and Waterbury call for a change of direction in economic activity for the region. They suggest rather a difficult road ahead: non-agricultural development.[36] Transforming the pre-dominantly agrarian Arab economies – especially those of the Levant – to non-agricultural development is not an easy task. The not-so-successful efforts of state-led industrialization/ developmentalism of the 1950s and 1960s are telling in this case. Another possibility to cope with water scarcity can be finding ways

(35) See for example Joyce R. Starr, "Water Wars", *Foreign Policy*, No 82, Spring 1991, pp. 17-36.

(36) Richards and Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, pp. 176-177.

of cooperation with neighbors. In a highly securitized environment, such mechanisms might be expected to help alleviate if not end the political tension in the region. But, looking at the question of how much cooperation can be achieved in sharing the permanent rivers, which are the main source of surface water, little success has been achieved so far. As Stang suggests, as with other issues, the Levant has little success in term of cooperation in environmental issues. Although it has more geographic opportunities to "pursue environmental cooperation than other sub-regions of the MENA with the shared waters of Jordan, Tigris and Euphrates basins crossing the borders", there is little possibility of cooperation, as the regional conflict overrides attempts for collaboration in the Levant.[37]

Although ending up in failure, there had been a couple of initiatives. For example, the 1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Agreement led to the establishment of a Joint Water Committee that would help parties to share water, build infrastructure and provide for joint project development. The cooperation continued for over twenty years, but it has been highly politicized and the "decisions are often dictated by Israel".[38] The Euphrates-Tigris Basin has also witnessed competition rather than cooperation. The water issue has been highly politicized, especially between Turkey and Syria in the 1990s and has been linked to bilateral security problems.[39] In the 2000s, although the two countries have managed to see the water issue more as a technical one, and managed to cooperate on water sharing, this period did not produce any agreements. As the Turkish-Syrian relations strained after the beginning

(37) Gerald Stang, "Climate Challenges in the Middle East – Rethinking Environmental Cooperation", *Middle East Institute Policy Paper,* Washington D.C, 2016-2, p. 9.

(38) Ibid., p. 11.

(39) Mustafa Aydın and Fulya Ereker, "Water Scarcity and Political Wrangling: Security in the Euphrates and Tigris Basin" in Hans Günter Brauch et all. (eds.), *Facing Global Environmental Change: Environmental, Human, Energy, Food, Health And Water Security Concepts*, Berlin & New York, Springer, 2009, pp. 603-613.

of the uprisings in Syria, water cooperation also vanished. This is a good example for demonstrating how water issues are subject to political agenda and thus high politics.

Growing Population and Food Security

The Middle East region in general, being one of the top food importers in the world, is extremely vulnerable to food supplies and prices. The region in general is suffering from deficits in bio-capacity and agricultural production.[40] As the global crop production declined in 2010, commodity prices jumped in the region. There is already some analysis that underlines how food security and the high food prices are one of the major factors that sparked the Arab uprisings.[41] With other socio-economic challenges, this is surely one of the factors that added to the frustration of the masses with their current regimes. However, although the issue is central for a population's livelihood, policies oriented towards food security do not seem to be prioritized by the governments. In the words of the former Director of Policy Planning at the US Department of State, Ann Marie Slaughter, the discussion on food security lacks two qualities necessary to be taken seriously: "it is not immediate and it is not sexy."[42] Yet, food security is actually immediate. Considering the volatility of food imports, most Middle East countries are trying to achieve food sufficiency. But without available resources some are now directing their energies to acquire land abroad. For example, Jordan and Turkey joined

(40) John Waterbury, "The Political Economy of Climate Change in the Arab World", Arab Human Development Report Research Paper Series, New York, UNDP, 2013, p. 35.

(41) For example see, Ines Perez "Climate Change and Rising Food Prices Heightened Arab Spring", ClimateWire, 4 March 2013, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/climate-change-and-rising-food-prices-heightened-arab-spring/ (Accessed 30 January 2018).

(42) Ibid.

in a group of Gulf countries to buy land in Sudan.[43] Although Turkey ranks 49th and Jordan 55th in the food security index among the 113 countries in the list,[44] their rush to buy/lease land abroad can be seen as an attempt to meet the challenge ahead. The others are not lucky or prepared as much. Thus, coupled with environmental constraints, food security will be a serious challenge ahead for the countries of the Levant.

Environmental Challenges – Resource Scarcity and Security Concerns

As is discussed above, the region is highly stressed by the challenges posed by a growing population. As the competition to share resources increases, environmental degradation and climate change is putting additional stress on these resources. As has been often argued, in the Middle East in general, there is a "long-term mismanagement of natural resources."[45] The aggregation of this neglect, coupled with the recent challenges of environmental degradation and climate change, could "make the parts of the MENA region", including parts of the Levant, "uninhabitable".[46] As is often reported, most Arab countries have contributed very little to the greenhouse effect. For example, the MENA's share of carbon dioxide emissions is no more than 4.7 per cent, lower than any other region except

(43) Waterbury, "The Political Economy of Climate Change in the Arab World", p. 36; "Türkiye Sudan'da tarım arazisi kiraladı" (Turkey Leased Agricultural Land in Sudan), TRT Haber, 13 May 2014, http://www.trthaber.com/haber/ekonomi/turkiye-sudanda-tarim-arazisi-kiraladi-127324.html (accessed 30 January 2018).

(44) Global Food Security Index, http://foodsecurityindex.eiu.com (Accessed 1 February 2018).

(45) Francesca De Chatel, "The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising – Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 50 (4), 2014, pp. 521-535.

(46) Loulla-Mae Eleftheriou-Smith, "Climate change could make parts of the Middle East and North Africa 'uninhabitable'", *Independent*, 3 May 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/climate-change-could-make-parts-of-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-uninhabitable-a7010811.html (Accessed 30 January 2018).

Sub-Saharan Africa.[47] Despite this, the region will be directly affected from climate change in terms of water scarcity and thus faces a decrease in agricultural production, higher levels of emigration, lower levels of economic production, deepened food insecurity, increased poverty and a higher risk of social instability.[48] Yet, as in other issues, Waterbury argues that when dealing with environmental challenges "going through the motions or doing nothing is a viable political strategy and may be attractive unless there are sufficient incentives, mainly economic and financial, to induce real commitments to adaptation".[49]

There have been a couple of initiatives that problematized the environmental issues in the Levant. The Middle East Environmental Security Initiative, which brought Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Authority together, has been important in providing for a forum for regional cooperation.[50] Beginning its activities in 1997, it brought key issues, such as renewable energy and a need for regional dialogue to the agenda.[51] Also, there are various non-state initiatives run by the NGOs, two of which especially stand out: The Israeli-Palestine Center for Research and Information (ICPRI), established in 1988 and renamed Israel-Palestine: Creative Regional Initiatives in 2003,[52] and EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth in the Middle East, which works on the environmental impact of conflicts/

(47) Human Development Report 2007/2008 – Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World, New York, UNDP, 2007.

(48) For details see Oli Brown and Alec Crawford, *Rising Temperatures, Rising Tensions-Climate Change and the Risk of Violent Conflict in the Middle East*, Manitoba, Canada, International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2009.

(49) Waterbury, "The Political Economy of Climate Change in the Arab World", p. 24.

(50) Hans Günter Brauch, "Environment and Security in the Middle East: Conceptualizing Environmental, Human, Food, Health and Gender Security", in C. Lipchin et al. (eds.), *Integrated Water Resources Management and Security in the Middle East,* Proceedings of the NATO Advanced Study Institute on Integrated Water Resources Management and Security in the Middle East, Kibbutz Ketura, Israel, Springer, 2007, pp. 126-127.

(51) Ibid.

(52) See *http://www.ipcri.org/index.php/about* (Accessed 30 March 2018).

wars in the region. The IPCRI declares that a large part of its "peace-building work focuses on the environment". It looks at the impact of "environmental degradation on Israel and Palestine, developing environmentally conscious infrastructure in West Bank and Gaza and promoting the economic benefits of cooperation between Israel and Palestine".[53] EcoPeace, on the other hand, established in 1994, has offices in Amman, Bethlehem and Tel Aviv, and works on the "promotion of cooperative efforts to protect" the "shared environmental heritage" of the region.[54] Considering that the region is prone to conflict and has experienced a high frequency of wars, demonstrating the environmental impact of conflict is significant. Yet, again such concerns often yield to high politics and strategic priorities and do not produce tangible results on the ground.

Global warming in general severely affects the region. But, like in other aspects, climate change is "too nebulous and long term and even seemingly hypothetical to be a priority for most people…Doing nothing has proven the easy option".[55] Warming of about 0.2 degrees per decade has been observed in the MENA region from 1961 to 1990, and at an even faster rate since then.[56] Studies show that by the end of the century, "unusual heat extremes will occur in about 30 percent of summer months almost everywhere in the MENA region".[57] Living in certain places in the region will be impossible, and will create huge migration waves within and from the region. Many studies underline a direct linkage between

(53) Ibid.

(54) For objectives and history of the Organization http://ecopeaceme.org/ (Accessed 30 March 2018).

(55) Stang, *Climate Challenges in the Middle East*, p. 4.

(56) Katharina Waha et.al, "Climate change impacts in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region and their implications for vulnerable population groups", *Regional Environmental Change,* Vol. 17 (6), August 2017, pp. 1623-1638.

(57) Ibid.

climate change and migration.[58] Internal migration will continue to be important, as many people will be forced to move, while others — the poor — will have to stay back. In such a context, it is not only enough to talk about the migration as a consequence of climate change, but it is also necessary to talk about how to gauge climate change in relation to other economic and political conditions that might foster or limit migration. Another important question centers on how MENA governments plan to address the coming climate-motivated migration waves.

Is there a direct linkage between climate change and security? By creating competition for scarce resources, intensifying food insecurity and hindering economic growth, climate change is considered to be a cause for many security concerns.[59] The linkage between migration as a consequence of climate change and conflicts is often underlined. When the Arab uprisings reached Syria, many studies rushed to note that a main cause of the uprising might be related to the severe drought the country experienced between 2006-2010, which led to a huge migration wave.[60] In 2009, more than 800,000 Syrians were reported to have lost their livelihoods due to the drought in northern Syria.[61] Migrants to Der'a from northern Syria were considered by some analysts to have been a

(58) For example see, Clionadh Raleigh, Lisa Jordan and Idean Salehyan, "Assessing the Impact of Climate Change on Migration and Conflict", World Bank Group for the Social Dimensions of Climate Change, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/Resources/SDCCWorkingPaper_MigrationandConflict.pdf (Accessed 30 January 2018).

(59) Brown and Crawford, *Rising Temporatures, Rising Tensions*, pp. 2-3.

(60) For example see, Henry Fountain, "Researchers Link Syrian Conflict to a Drought Made Worse by Climate Change", *New York Times*, 2 March 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/03/science/earth/study-links-syria-conflict-to-drought-caused-by-climate-change.html (Accessed 30 January 2018).

(61) Francesco Femia and Caitlin Werrell, "Syria: Climate Change, Drought and Social Unrest" in The Center for Climate & Security, *Exploring the Security Risks of Climate Change*, Washington D.C., 29 February 2012, https://climateandsecurity.org 2012/02/29/syria-climate-change-drought-and-social-unrest (Accessed 30 January 2018).

driver of the uprising. But research done by Fröhlich shows that this was not the case. Migrants from northern Syria were too weak and not established in Der'a and thus incapable of organizing the community towards collective action.[62] Rather than establishing a direct causality, it is possible to argue that 'climate migration' can act "as a threat multiplier" in the region "by placing additional pressure on already scarce resources and by reinforcing preexisting threats such as political instability, poverty and unemployment".[63] Chatel emphasizes the role of the Syrian state during the drought period and argues that it was not the drought, "but rather the government's failure to respond to the ensuing humanitarian crisis that formed one of the triggers of the uprising, feeding a discontent that had long been simmering in rural areas."[64] While Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine were also affected by drought in 2007-2008, Chatel explains that the humanitarian crisis emerged in Syria and not in any other Levantine countries due to the government's long-term neglect of the rural areas and need for reform and decades of accumulated mismanagement. How the state created the crisis situation and later handled (or did not handle it) is what is critical. The policies of the Syrian government have depleted the North of its resources and the drought only added further devastation to an already critical situation. Blaming the uprising solely on climate change would mean taking responsibility off the state. The state is the most important actor and is required to act but chooses not to, complicating the problem and creating grave consequences.

(62) Christiane J. Fröhlich, "Climate migrants as protestors? Dispelling misconceptions about global environmental change in pre-revolutionary Syria, *Contemporary Levant*, Vol. 1, 2016, pp. 38-50.

(63) Ibid.

(64) De Chatel, "The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising".

Conclusion

This paper argued that the Levant is facing enormous challenges due to a youth bulge and resource scarcity. The rising population, environmental challenges and climate change are all putting a strain on the region's already scarce resources. Considering that the region is witnessing a rapidly growing youth population, the ensuing unemployment, cronyism, labor-seeking emigration and increasing likelihood of drought will continue to be challenges in future decades. As it is underlined above, societies with growing young populations face both opportunities and challenges. There is a potential of dynamism and growth. Yet on the other hand there exists a high risk for instability if the demands for the youth cannot be met. Despite different levels of development, the countries of the Levant share similar challenges when faced with the need to meet the demands of their growing populations.

As shown, the need to address the requirements is pressing but, despite the severity of the picture and demand for new policies, the states are mostly occupied with hard security issues and are struggling with civil wars, violent non-state actors, and sectarian politics. In almost every country of the Levant there is either an ongoing conflict or a danger of its eruption. While the Palestinian issue still lies at the heart of regional politics, the devastating civil war in Syria brought in different regional and international actors, making all its neighbors — Iraq, Turkey, Jordan and Israel — a part of the crisis to different degrees. In the context of ongoing crises, population issues and resource scarcity are easily neglected. The states also use high politics as a way to justify inaction and thus continue to prioritize regime security and cronyism.

Also the presence of imminent danger of war inhibits cooperation between parties. Considering that the effects of environmental problems and resource scarcity can best be mitigated through cooperation, the Levant seems to be far from witnessing any change in this aspect. Yet, it is the issues of population, environment and resources that will determine the future of the regimes of the Levant. Considering how these issues are linked to security, without providing basic level of human security, the risk of future instability is very high. How to persuade the unwilling leaders to take action seems to be the hardest task.

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Part III

The New Balance of Power: Key Actors for the Region

Levantine Challenges on Turkish Foreign Policy

Mustafa Aydın – Cihan Dizdaroğlu

Introduction

Modern day Turkey has not seen itself as part of the Levant and has not looked at the region as an integrated unit of analysis until recently, and thus has not taken a holistic approach towards the region. Turkey's perception of the Eastern Mediterranean was restricted to Cyprus, and the rest of the Levant was construed as part of the wider Middle East.[1] Accordingly, the Turkish academic literature does not refer to the Levant, except on rare occasions where it actually discusses the Cyprus problem.[2]

Regardless, as one of the most powerful states in the region, Turkey has been an important actor in Levantine politics and played an active role in the region during the 1930s in response to Italy's expansionist tendencies towards the Eastern Mediterranean. The 1936 proposal to create Mediterranean Pact was one such example. But by the outbreak of the Second World War, these sporadic ideas had not yet transformed into a full-fledged regional policy and then after the war, the region was perceived only within the context of the emerging East-West rivalry.[3]

The end of the Cold War allowed Turkey to redefine its priorities in international politics. Prompted by its growing economic needs after the liberalization program of the early 1980s, Turkey prioritized its economic relationships in its neighbourhood rather than focusing on global security concerns. This transformation into what Kirişçi referred to as a 'trading state' saw Turkey increase its focus on its neighbourhood.[4] The Levant, however, with the exception of Israel, remained rather insignificant in most of the early post-Cold War era. Only after the rise of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) to power in 2002 did the wider Middle East, including the Levant, attract increased attention from Turkey.

While the JDP emphasized the importance of economic prosperity and stability in Turkey's neighbourhood, the country's regional policies shifted in several aspects. Rather than focusing on long-standing problems such as the Cypriot imbroglio, the JDP preferred new policy tools to improve Turkey's relations with its neighbours such as visa-liberalization, mediation, building industrial zones and free trade areas, and joint cabinet meetings. Thus, a new policy line, formulated as 'zero problems with neighbours', was spearheaded by Ahmed Davutoğlu, the then Chief Foreign Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister and later the Minister of Foreign Affairs.[5]

(1) İlter Turan, "Turkey and the Mediterranean: Balancing Geopolitics and Geo-Economics", *German Marshall Fund Mediterranean Policy Program Policy Brief*, 2011, p. 1; Kemal Kirişci, "Comparing the Neighbourhood Policies of Turkey and the EU in the Mediterranean" in Meliha Benli Altunışık, Kemal Kirişci and Nathalie Tocci (eds.), *Turkey: Reluctant Mediterranean Power,* Washington D.C., German Marshall Fund, 2011, p. 23.

(2) Turan, "Turkey and the Mediterranean", pp. 1-6; Kirişci, "Comparing the Neighbourhood", pp. 21-44; Ebru Oğurlu, "Rising Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy", *Instituto Affari Internazionali Working Paper*, No 1204, 2012, pp. 1-15.

(3) Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkey as a 'Mediterranean Power' ", in Altunışık, Kirişci and Tocci (eds.), *Turkey: Reluctant Mediterranean Power,* p. 9.

(4) Kemal Kirişci, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State", *New Perspectives on Turkey,* No 40, 2009, pp. 29-57.

(5) Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik* [The Strategic Depth], İstanbul, Küre, 2001; Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", *Insight Turkey,* Vol. 10 (1), 2008, pp. 77-96; Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy", Conference Speech at SETA Foundation Washington D.C. Branch, 8 December 2009; Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Perspectives on Turkish Foreign Policy", Speech at the Brookings Institution, 29 November 2010.

In addition to the new policy approach, the country's political transformation and the emergence of new political classes with different preferences as well as the problems in accession negotiations with the EU triggered a transformation in Turkish foreign policy. Especially after JDP's second electoral victory in 2007, Turkey began to focus more closely on what it deemed it's neighbourhood, an area that encompassed the Levant, the Near East (including Iran and the South Caucasus), and North Africa. As a result, Turkey's relations with the countries of the region have increased considerably and reorientation of its foreign policy has become discernable.

Meanwhile, several regional and international developments provided momentum for Turkey's engagement with the Levant. First, the discoveries of hydrocarbon resources off the coasts of Israel, Cyprus and Egypt (Tamar field in 2009, Leviathan in 2010, Aphrodite in 2011, and Zohr in 2015) presented opportunities not only for the littoral states, but also for international actors. While the newly found reserves, with an estimated 122 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas in the Levant Basin, sparked a debate over the region's potential to become an additional source of energy for European markets,[6] it also encouraged Turkey in its strategy aimed at turning it into an 'energy hub' in the Eastern Mediterranean. As it is at the centre of the most direct and economic transport route from the region to Europe, Turkey is uniquely positioned to benefit from the development of Levantine energy resources. However, new challenges emerged as a result of these discoveries in terms of ownership of the resources, delimitation of territorial waters, maritime borders, and exclusive economic zones under conflicting atmosphere.

(6) "Assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas Resources of the Levant Basin Province, Eastern Mediterranean", *U.S. Geological Survey*, March 2010, http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2010/3014/pdf/FS10-3014.pdf (Accessed 12 February 2014).

Secondly, the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings in late 2010 created additional security problems for regional and international actors. Like others, Turkey was caught unprepared by the widespread political instability of the region, which subsequently has had a serious impact on Turkey's domestic stability as well as its relations with the regional states. While Turkey had earlier managed to establish somewhat workable political and economic relations with the existing regimes in the region, the chaos that followed the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings has disrupted these relations. Whereas Turkey previously faced an 'ethics versus interest' dilemma in its connections with the autocratic regimes,[7] its policies of supporting pro-democracy actors, providing aid to opposition groups, and aiming for regime change in neighbouring countries has resulted in short-term problems and long-term uncertainties.

Finally, various developments in the surrounding region over the last few decades, such as the instability wrought by United States' invasion of Iraq to the continued stagnation of the Arab-Israeli peace process, have continued to fuel region-wide turmoil, increasing political instability, slowing economic development, and affecting the balance of power. While the region's full potential could only be unleashed with the onset of stability, history demonstrates that stability can only be established when the region is controlled by a hegemonic power,[8] or an agreement is achieved among the paternalist states.[9]

(7) Ziya Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions: Boundaries of Regional Power Influence in a Turbulent Middle East", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19 (2), 2014, p. 6.

(8) Volkan Ş. Ediger, Balkan Devlen and Deniz Bingöl McDonald, "Levant'ta Büyük Oyun: Doğu Akdeniz'in Enerji Jeopolitiği [Great Game in Levant: Energy Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean], Uluslararası İlişkiler, Vol. 9 (33), p. 80.

(9) Mustafa Aydın and Damla Aras, "Political Conditionality of Economic Relations Between Paternalist States: Turkey's Interaction with Iran, Iraq, and Syria", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 27 (1-2), 2005, pp. 21-43.

This paper will first look at the recent history of Turkey's relations with the Levantine countries. Then, it will focus on the regional and international developments that influence Turkey's policies towards the region. It will argue that developments in recent years have provided space for Turkey to take a more active role in the region, but that Turkey's own limitations, policy choices, and regional dynamics have restricted its ability to do so.

Recent History of Turkey's Levant Connection

Since late 1990s, Turkey's engagement with the Levant, and more broadly with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, has become increasingly noticeable. In the absence of a clearly defined Levant policy, the sum of Turkey's bilateral relations with regional countries encapsulates its overall Levant policy.

After decades of tense relations with some of the regional countries, primarily the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) and Syria, Turkey became eager in early 2000s to solve or at least move beyond these problems. Modification of its foreign policy away from security concerns towards an economic focus originally appeared as a result of Turkey's move from import-substitution development strategy to an export-led growth strategy in the 1980s. The liberalization of the Turkish economy prompted the county to focus on nearby markets. Economic considerations would become paramount during the 1990s when Turkey 'became increasingly concerned with…striking deals with foreign governments' in an effort to sell its goods and generate foreign direct investment.[10] By the time JDP came to power in 2002, the economic consequences of foreign policy were already weighing heavily on decision-making and the main policy motto of the time, i.e., 'zero problems with

(10) Mustafa Aydın, "Twenty Years Before, Twenty Years After: Turkish Foreign Policy at the Threshold of the 21st Century", in Tareq Y. Ismael and Mustafa Aydın (eds.), *Turkey's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: A Changing Role in World Politics*, New York, Ashgate, 2003, p. 12.

neighbours', was mainly built upon the pre-JDP perspective of developing closer relations with neighbours to further economic prosperity.

Accordingly, a new line of policy, designed to benefit from Turkey's central location and historical connections was put forward by the JDP during the 2000s.[11] One of the earliest examples was Turkey's Cyprus policy, where the first JDP government implemented a major policy shift when it supported the peace plan brokered by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2004. This move could be seen within the wider context of Turkey's changing Levant policy and moving away from exclusive determinacy of security concerns.[12]

In its first term (2002-2007), the JDP focused mainly on Turkey's approximation with the EU law and the related domestic reforms, eventually leading the country to begin accession negotiations with the EU in October 2005. These negotiations would have significant implications on the future course of Turkish foreign policy. The reforms in general improved the country's political stability, supported economic growth, enabled major strides towards democratization, decreased the role of military in political life, and helped change the foreign policy decision-making process. As a result, the influence of the military in decision-making decreased significantly and the policy-shaping role of the National Security Council diminished.[13] As the military had played a decisive role throughout the 1990s on Turkey's international relations, the decline of its influence also had a profound affect on the country's foreign policy.14

(11) Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", p. 78.

(12) Altunışık, "Turkey as a 'Mediterranean Power'", p. 15.

(13) Mustafa Aydın and Sinem Akgül Açıkmeşe, "Europeanization through EU Conditionality: Understanding the New Era in Turkish Foreign Policy", *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans,* Vol. 9 (3), 2007, p. 269.

(14) Ümit Cizre, "The Anatomy of the Turkish Military's Political Autonomy", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 29 (2), 1997, pp. 151-166; Gencer Özcan, "Facing its Waterloo in Diplomacy: Turkey's Military in Foreign Policy-Making Process", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No 40, 2009, pp. 83-102; Ali L. Karaosmanoğlu, "Transformation of Turkey's Civil-Military Relations Culture and International Environment", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 12 (2), 2011, pp. 253-264.

In the meantime, the emergence of a new Anatolian bourgeoisie also had an impact on Turkey's policies in its neighbourhood. Through their closer connection with the government, the newly established Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (MÜSİAD) of small to medium sized businesses from Anatolia pushed for closer economic relations with the countries in the wider Middle East.[15] Using Turkey's geographical proximity and their cultural affinity, these businessmen enthusiastically penetrated into the Levant,[16] forcing the foreign policy establishment to follow them. As a result, until disrupted by the Arab Spring, JDP governments expanded Turkey's relations with neighbouring countries using new tools such as visa-liberalization, free trade-zones, and joint cabinet meetings.

The most dramatic change was seen in the transformation of relations with Syria. After the signature of the Adana Agreement on 20 October 1998, following a near-war crisis, relations between Syria and Turkey began to improve. The two countries signed a Free Trade Agreement in December 2004, and simultaneously established the Turkish-Syrian Business Council.[17] Free trade agreements were also signed with Egypt in 2005, Lebanon in 2010, and Jordan in 2011. To increase the dialogue with these countries, High-Level Strategic Cooperation Councils were established and visa requirements were lifted for citizens of Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon in 2009. Moreover, at Turkey's initiative, the 'Close Neighbours Economic and Trade Association Council' was established in July 2010 with Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, and a call was issued to

(15) Özlem Tür, "Economic Relations with the Middle East Under the AKP-Trade, Business Community and Reintegration with Neighbouring Zones", *Turkish Studies,* Vol. 12 (4), 2011, pp. 589-602.

(16) Mustafa Kutlay, "Economy as the 'Practical Hand' of 'New Turkish Foreign Policy': A Political Economy Explanation", *Insight Turkey,* Vol. 13 (1), 2011, p. 76.

(17) Meliha Benli Altunışık and Özlem Tür, "From Distant Neighbours to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations", *Security Dialogue,* Vol. 37 (2), 2006, pp. 229-248; Meliha Benli Altunışık, "Turkey's Changing Middle East Policy", *UNISCI Discussion Papers,* No 23, 2010, p. 152.

establish the 'East Mediterranean Four: Levant Business Forum' to encourage greater economic integration among these states.[18] With these moves, Turkey's economic relations with the Levant expanded steadily and its volume of trade increased significantly.

The closer relations with Israel established during the second part of 1990s mainly on the basis of security cooperation not only continued during the first term of the JDP, but also expanded with Turkey's attempt to play a facilitator role between Israel, Syria, and Palestine.[19] However, relations have since deteriorated with strong criticism of Israel coming from Prime Minister Erdoğan after Israel's 2008 'Operation Cast Lead' in Gaza.[20] While the criticism of Israel increased the popularity of the JDP in Turkey and in the Arab Middle East, it led to worsening relations between the two countries. Another contributing incident occurred with the verbal skirmish between Prime Minister Erdoğan and Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009.[21] The turbulent relations finally led to a breaking point with the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010, when Israeli troops attacked an international flotilla sailing towards Gaza with the intent to break the Israeli siege. The Israeli attack on the flotilla resulted in the death of eight Turkish citizens. While diplomatic relations ended with the withdrawal of Turkish Ambassador

(18) Kemal Kirişci, "Arab Uprisings and Completing Turkey's Regional Integration: Challenges and Opportunities for US-Turkish Relations", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies,* Vol. 15 (2), 2013, p. 193; Tür, "Economic Relations with the Middle East", p. 597.

(19) Meliha Benli Altunışık and Esra Çuhadar, "Turkey's Search for a Third Party Role in Arab–Israeli Conflicts: A Neutral Facilitator or a Principal Power Mediator?", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 15 (3), 2010, pp. 371-392; İlker Aytürk, "The Coming of an Ice Age? Turkish-Israeli Relations Since 2002", *Turkish Studies,* Vol. 12 (4), 2011, pp. 675-687.

(20) "Gaza and Strains in Israeli-Turkish Relations", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 January 2010, https://www.cfr.org/interview/gaza-and-strains-israeli-turkish-relations (Accessed 15 December 2017).

(21) "Leaders of Turkey and Israel Clash at Davos Panel", *The New York Times*, 29 January 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/world/europe/30clash.html (Accessed 15 December 2017).

to Israel, thanks to the Free Trade Agreement signed in 1996, economic relations continued to expand and trade volumes grew with the sole exceptions being 2009 and 2012

Turkey also contributed to international efforts to bring peace to the region. When the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon was established in 2006 after the Israel-Hezbollah War, Turkey contributed one frigate and allowed the interim force to use the Mersin Port. Working with Qatar, Turkey played an instrumental role in brokering the Doha Agreement on 21 May 2008 that ended the political stalemate in Lebanon. Similarly, Turkey played a mediator role between Israel and Syria, which would lead to the May 2008 announcement that Israel and Syria had been talking to each other indirectly through Turkey.[22] In a similar vein,

Turkey launched the 'Industry for Peace Initiative' in 2005 and established the Ankara Forum to enable a tripartite dialogue mechanism between Turkish, Israeli and Palestinian business communities.[23] All these initiatives collapsed, however, with the 'Operation Cast Lead' in December 2008.

Taken together, Turkey's engagement with the Levant, though started in the late 1990s, increased gradually during the 2000s. With the new policy line and the tools connected with it, Turkey succeeded in establishing good political and economic relations with most countries in the region.

(22)"Assad confirms Turkish mediation with Israel", *The Guardian*, 24 April 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/24/syria.israelandthepalestinians (Accessed 6 May 2018).
(23) "TEPAV Hosted the Three Presidents", *TEPAV*, 13 November 2007, http://www.tepav.org.tr/en/haberler/s/1101 (Accessed 8 February 2014).

Energy Dimension

The discovery of offshore hydrocarbon resources in the eastern Mediterranean added a new dimension to Levantine politics. Despite the region's potential as an additional energy supplier to Europe, existing disputes over maritime borders and sovereign rights posed significant barriers. As the maritime borders between the regional countries had not been demarcated before the energy discoveries were made, national claims on the resources overlap and have created a rather tense political environment in the eastern Mediterranean.[24]

Turkey's concerns mainly relate to its and the Turkish Cypriots' sovereign rights in sea. Since 2003, the RoC has been negotiating delimitation agreements with coastal countries, excluding Turkey, and has granted licenses for exploration and production. Turkey first criticized the RoC because it was not included in these negotiations, though geographical features of the region require multilateral approach. Turkey's second criticism was centred on its argument that the RoC does not have a legitimate claim to represent the entire island of Cyprus. Turkey insists that RoC is not entitled to negotiate and adopt agreements in the absence of the Turkish Cypriot community, and that any resources exploited in future should belong to all Cypriots. Turkey further argues that, in the absence of an agreement between the two sides on the island on how to use potential natural resources, the appropriation of resources has to wait until a comprehensive solution is found. Even if the two sides on the island agree on a solution, Turkey argues, there is a need for negotiation between Turkey and the future state of Cyprus to delimit the sea between them.

(24) Walid Khadduri, "East Mediterranean Gas: Opportunities and Challenges", *Mediterranean Politics,* Vol. 17 (1), 2012, p. 111.

Nevertheless, the RoC signed exclusive economic zone (EEZ) agreements with Egypt on 17 February 2003, Lebanon on 17 January 2007, and with Israel on 17 December 2010. In response, Turkey made several demarches with these countries and protested its exclusion from the negotiations, though was not able to prevent the signatures. The RoC adopted a law in February 2007 to identify 13 oil exploration fields around the island and launched its first international tender for offshore exploration on 15 February 2007, prompting Turkey to warn all interested parties to act responsibly and not harm the prospects for a comprehensive Cyprus solution.[25] Finally, a US-registered company, Noble Energy, began drilling in the RoC's Aphrodite field on 19 September 2011. In response, Turkey concluded a continental shelf delimitation agreement with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) on 21 September 2011[26] and in April 2012 authorized Turkish Petroleum Company to begin offshore exploration off the coast of the island in areas that overlap with six exploration fields also claimed by the RoC.

In addition to the discoveries on the Aphrodite field, another Noble Energy led consortium had earlier discovered Tamar field in January 2009 off the coast of Israel, with estimated reserves of 9 tcf of gas, and Leviathan field in December 2010, with estimated reserves of 16 tcf of gas.[27] Finally, in August 2015, ENI of Italy discovered Zohr field off Egypt with more than 30 tcf of potential gas in August 2015.[28] These discoveries raised hopes for possibility of exporting energy to Europe after meeting local demand.It was hoped that a pipeline connecting the regional countries might offer strategic opportunities, such as thawing relations between Israel and Turkey, reaching an agreement on Cyprus, and re-energizing Turkey's efforts to join the EU.[29] Although it initially served as a catalyst to revive the negotiations on the island on 11 February 2014 after a two-year break, the on-going competition in the disputed areas has overshadowed the prospects of solution, and turned into another obstacle in the way of finding a solution for Cyprus. Since then, any attempt to enter the disputed area by RoC authorized companies has elicited a response from the Turkish side, sometimes in the form of Turkish warships blocking drilling ships and declaring immediate area as unsafe for navigation.[30]

Although it is still early to know the final impact of these gas reserves on regional peace and co-operation, the discoveries have already affected regional alliances and altered Turkey's energy strategy. First of all, the alignment between the positions of Israel, the RoC and Greece, arguing that a pipeline from the region would provide cheaper natural gas to Europe and contribute to EU's quest for diversifying its sources of supply, has shifted the regional balance of power. In addition to an agreement between Israel and Egypt in February 2018 on exporting Israeli gas to Egypt, the leaders of Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece have met on several occasions to boost cooperation among the three countries.[31]

(25)*Statement of the Spokesman*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 August 2007, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/_p_qa_32---statement-of-the-spokesman-of-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-of-turkey-in-response-to-a-question-_unofficial-translation___p_en.mfa (Accessed 14 February 2014).

(26) *Press Statement No. 216*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 September 2011, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-216_-21-september-2011_-press-statement-on-the-continental-shelf-delimitation-agreement-signed-between-turkey-and-the-trnc.en.mfa (Accessed 14 December 2014).

(27) Khadduri, "East Mediterranean Gas", pp. 113-114.

(28) "Eni begins producing from Zohr, the largest ever discovery of gas in the Mediterranean Sea", *ENI*, 20 December 2017, https://www.eni.com/en_IT/media/2017/12/eni-begins-producing-from-zohr-the-largest-ever-discovery-of-gas-in-the-mediterranean-sea (Accessed 8 March 2018).

(29) Matthew Bryza, "Israel-Turkey Pipeline Can Fix Eastern Mediterranean", *Bloomberg Business*, 20 January 2014, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-01-20/israel-turkey-pipeline-can-fix-eastern-mediterranean (Accessed 15 March 2014). Also see Ayla Gürel and Laura Le Cornu, "Can Gas Catalyse Peace in the Eastern Mediterranean?", *Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 49 (2), 2014, pp. 11-33.

(30) See for example *MiddleEastEye*, 8 October 2014; *BBC*, 15 May 2015; *Hurriyet Daily News*, 10 February 2018.

(31) "Energy, peace focus of Tripartite Summit", *Cyprus Mail*, 21 November 2017, https://cyprus-mail.com/2017/11/21/energy-eu-relations-focus-tripartite-summit/ (Accessed 10 February 2018).

This rapprochement would no doubt add a layer to the on-going dispute between Turkey, the RoC and TRNC over territorial waters and EEZs.

In terms of Turkey's energy strategy, the possibility of a new pipeline through Turkey to Europe would contribute to its goal of becoming an energy hub in the region. As Turkey is situated at the centre of the transport routes from Levant to Europe, it hopes that any gas from the Levant will pass through Turkey en route to Europe. The fact that these gas discoveries occurred at a time when Turkey's relations with Israel were deteriorating helped pave the way for the rapprochement between Israel, the RoC and Greece. Furthermore, the tension between Turkey and the RoC over exploration and drilling rights will likely to continue blocking any possibility that a pipeline will be built through Turkey anytime soon.[32]

Outbreak of Arab Uprisings and Regional Instability

The chain of events that triggered popular quests for good governance and better living conditions throughout the MENA at the end of 2010 has created serious challenges for the entire region, including Turkey. They also have effected Turkey's relations with the other countries in the region.

Turkey was unprepared for the momentous changes in the region when the uprisings began. During the previous decade, Turkey had successfully developed closer economic and political relationships with the existing ruling regimes. The uprisings disrupted these relationships. When confronted with a choice between supporting the regimes or emerging

(32) Gareth M. Winrow, "The Southern Gas Corridor and Turkey's Role as an Energy Transit State and Energy Hub", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 15 (1), 2013, p. 157.

opposition movements, Turkey faced a dilemma of 'ethics versus interest'.[33] It soon became clear that supporting autocratic regimes could in the long run undermine Turkey's ambition for regional leadership, while providing support for the opposition would also jeopardize its interests in the long term if the expected change did not occur. This dilemma was evident early when Turkey came out with a strong support of the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, but was quite reluctant to support the opposition in Libya and Syria due to deeper economic and political involvement.

In Egypt, Turkey almost immediately welcomed the collapse of the regime and supported the interim government and then the subsequent government of President Mohammed Morsi. However, his ousting within a year as a result of a military coup adversely affected Turkey's position and the strong language used by Turkish leaders in their condemnation of the military takeover led to the expulsion of the Turkish Ambassador on 23 November 2013. In response, Turkey declared Egyptian Ambassador to Ankara *persona non-grata* and downgraded its diplomatic relations with Egypt.[34] Since then, having taken a strong position against the military intervention, and despite various attempts to restore ties, Turkey failed to improve its relations with Egypt to its previous level.[35]

(33) Öniş, "Turkey and the Arab Revolutions", p. 6.

(34) *Press Release No. 310*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 23 November 2013, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-310_-23-november-2013_-press-release-regarding-the-relations-between-turkey-and-egypt.en.mfa (Accessed 14 December 2014).

(35) For instance, with the mediation attempt of Saudi Arabia, in which King Salman travelled to Ankara following his Cairo visit in April 2016, and as a result, Turkey invited Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el Sisi to Istanbul for the summit of the Organization for Islamic Conference in April 2016, though finally Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sameh Shoukry attended it on behalf of President Sisi. Moreover, the two countries' foreign ministers met during the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Venezuela in September 2016. See *MiddleEastEye*, 17 October 2016; *Hurriyet Daily News*, 6 April 2016; *Daily News Egypt*, 19 May 2018.

In Libya, Turkey was initially cautious, mainly due to its economic interests. As the situation deteriorated, Turkey's top priority became the evacuation of the almost 25,000 Turkish workers residing in the country. At this point, Turkey did not support international intervention, with Prime Minister Erdoğan arguing that 'military intervention by NATO in Libya or any other country would be totally counter-productive' (*Reuters*, 14 March 2011). Yet after Turkey successfully evacuated its citizens (*Milliyet*, 2 March 2011) and the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1973 on 17 March, approving the creation of a 'no-fly zone' as well as authorizing member states to take 'all necessary measures' to protect civilians in Libya (UNSC, 2011), Turkey changed its position, and called for Gadhafi's resignation on 3 May. Turkey then supported the NATO operation with naval and air forces. (Shadid, 2011).

However, by far the most intricate challenge the Arab uprisings have created for Turkey was the unrest in Syria, which quickly metastasised into a civil war. The Syrian Civil War has become a litmus test for the JDP policies in the Levant in general. The fact that Syria shares an 899 km border with Turkey, with ethnic Kurds and Arabs living on both sides, and considering the chequered history of the relationship between the two countries, the government initially hesitated. Prime Minister Erdoğan had earlier believed that his personal rapport with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, developed over a decade-long political and economic investment and cultivation of friendship, would provide him with a leverage to convince al-Assad to behave in such a way to ease tensions and avert the disturbances through reforms. However, the regime did not respond to the pleas and reacted with force when faced with popular demands.

When faced with an intractable autocratic regime in Damascus and what seemed to be a strong uprising in the north of the country, Turkey reversed its policy and started to support the opposition groups. It seemed that Turkey, having seen the regime changing capability of the earlier uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen, underestimated the power of Assad regime in Syria. Turkey also may have underestimated the determination of outside powers, such as Russia and Iran, to support the regime in Syria.[36] While Turkey initially tried to persuade the international community to launch an intervention, as it did in Libya, this time global actors were not willing to get involved. This would lead to a situation where Turkey found itself on the same side with Saudi Arabia and Qatar in aiding opposition groups, yet its inability to organize them into a workable alternative to the Assad regime contributed to the reluctance of other countries to get involved. Moreover, Turkey's active involvement in the Syrian crisis has created a rather negative narrative and has impacted its international image, with accusations that it pursued a sectarian foreign policy and supported radical Islamists associated with al-Qaeda.[37]

Humanitarian concerns related to the crisis have also become important, as Turkey has received more than 3.5 million refugees from Syria. Besides the obvious difficulties involved in caring for such large numbers of people, the border between the two countries has, at times, ceased to function and has allowed illicit movements of radical Islamists going to fight in Syria. Moreover, the threat level for Turkey in connection with radical groups operating in the region increased considerably after the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2011. The threat posed by such groups would continue to rise as northern Syria turned into a multi-front conundrum with fighting occurring between ISIL and Kurdish groups, between opposition groups and the al-Assad regime, and sometimes between ISIL and the opposition forces for control of areas near the Turkish border.

(36) Jonny Hogg and Tülay Karadeniz, "Assad's staying power leaves Turkey frustrated and exposed", *Reuters*, 27 May 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/27/us-syria-crisis-turkey-idUSKBN0E710G20140527 (Accessed 15 December 2014).

(37) Seymour M. Hersh, "The Red Line and the Rat Line", *London Review of Books*, Vol. 36 (8), 2014, pp. 21-24.

The destructive impact of the conflict also extended into Turkey, as seen by the terrorist attacks in Reyhanlı (May 2013), Diyarbakır (June 2015), Suruç (July 2015), Ankara (October 2015), İstanbul (January and March 2016), and Gaziantep (August 2016) by ISIL-affiliated individuals. Moreover, when ISIL forces, coming out of Iraq and occupying a sizeable chunk of northern Syria, clashed with Kurdish groups over the control of the town of Ayn al-Arab (*Kobane* in Kurdish), Turkey found itself under heavy international pressure to assist the Kurds, while no other international actor was willing to send ground forces. Although Turkey eventually allowed support units of Iraqi Kurds to be deployed from northern Iraq through Turkish territory to Syria,[38] the fighting between Kurdish groups and ISIL would spark unrest inside Turkey in October 2014 when Turkey refused involvement on behalf of the Kurds.[39]

Furthermore, on 11 June 2014, after ISIL seized the city of Mosul in Iraq, it took 49 Turkish Consulate staff as hostages. In response, Turkey began to gradually align itself with the US-led coalition against ISIL. After months of negotiations, on 19 February 2015, Turkey and the US reached an agreement to 'train and equip' Syrian opposition forces. A few days after the agreement, Turkey conducted an operation inside Syria to evacuate the remains of Süleyman Shah, the supposed grandfather of the first Ottoman Sultan, and to rescue the soldiers guarding the tomb in order to avoid another hostage situation. This operation, along with the 'train and equip' agreement temporarily provided manoeuvring space for Turkey and intensified its contribution to the US-led coalition forces by allowing the use of İncirlik and Diyarbakır airbases in Turkey for the airstrikes against ISIL.

(38) "Turkey to Let Iraqi Kurds Cross to Syria to Fight ISIS", *The New York Times*, 20 October 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/21/world/middleeast/kobani-turkey-kurdish-fighters-syria.html (Accessed 10 December 2014).

(39) Murat Yetkin, "Control Issues in Ankara", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 11 October 2014, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/control-issues-in-ankara.aspx?pageID=449&nID=72829&NewsCatID=409 (Accessed 10 December 2014).

The intervention of Russia into the Syrian Civil War in late September 2015 on behalf of the al-Assad Regime also impacted Turkey's strategic interest in the region. Turkey's geopolitical positioning in Syria was weakened considerably thanks to Russia and Iran's support for Assad, as well as the substantial support provided by the US and Russia to Kurdish groups. Finally, Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter jet when it violated Turkish airspace on 24 November 2015 led to suspension of Turkish military flights over Syria. The thaw in Turkish-Russian relations after June 2016 would change the equation again,[40] allowing Turkish Air Force to return to Syrian theatre. Since then, Turkey has taken an active role in Syria through direct military operations, such as the *Euphrates Shield* operation from August 2016 to March 2017 and the *Olive Branch* from January 2018 to May 2018.

Similarly, when the US chose to cooperate with Kurdish groups on the ground against ISIL from Autumn 2015 onwards, Turkey's relations with the US became strained. In the end, as a result of the combination of factors such as regional dynamics, Turkey's threat perceptions, disagreements with its Western allies, as well as the thaw in Turkish-Russian relationship, Turkey's insistence on the removal of al-Assad has softened and Turkey has become an active member of the Russian-led Astana process, which is paving the way for establishment of 'de-confliction zones' in parts of Syria.

In retrospect, it seems that Turkey made a number of miscalculations, over issues such as its own leverage in Syria, the endurance of the Syrian regime, the power of opposition forces, and the intentions of outside powers. Although it has gained some manoeuvring space following its *Euphrates Shield* and *Olive Branch* operations, this may not provide the

(40) "Ankara-Moscow pivot: a new era begins", *DW*, 8 July 2016, http://www.dw.com/en/ankara-moscow-pivot-a-new-era-begins/a-19456985 (Accessed 10 May 2018).

results Turkey had initially hoped. Thus, the Syrian imbroglio has become quicksand for Turkey, erasing the progress it had made over the course 1990s and 2000s in improving its political and economic ties to the Levant.

Changing Balance of Power

The developments in the Levant over the last decade, i.e. the failure of Arab-Israeli peace process, the US invasion of Iraq, discovery of offshore hydrocarbons, the Arab uprisings, and the emergence of new players including non-state actors, have had a serious impact on the regional balance of power. In addition to regional countries, extra-regional powers, chief among them are the US and Russia, have been seeking to maintain and/or increase their influence throughout the region via military presence and political alignments. The US has had strategic advantages in the Levant since the days of the Cold War, and was able to consolidate its status after it ended.[41] In contrast, the military presence of the Soviet Union was almost eliminated after the end of the Cold War, and Russia has been trying to re-establish it presence in the region. The Syrian crisis has provided an opportunity for Russia to achieve that aim.[42]

At the same time, as Turkey's relations with Israel developed in the post-Cold War era, a Turkey-US-Israel triangle has emerged as one of the cornerstones of the US policy in the Levant.[43] The emergence of disagreements within the triangle and its changing geometry over the last decade, sometimes caused by independent moves from Turkey

(41) Derek Lutterbeck and Georgij Engelbrecht, "The West and Russia in the Mediterranean: Towards a Renewed Rivalry?", *Mediterranean Politics,* Vol. 14 (3), 2009, p. 392.

(42) Lutterbeck and Engelbrecht, "The West and Russia", p. 393.

(43) Another triangle that the US based its Levant policy has been the US-Egypt-Israel triangle. See Jon B. Alterman and Haim Malka, "Shifting Eastern Mediterranean Geometry", *The Washington Quarterly,* Vol. 35 (3), 2012, p. 111.

and Israel clashing with US priorities, has affected both the US policy in the region and Turkey's position in the Levant.[44] The bilateral relations between the US and Turkey were severely damaged by the refusal of the Turkish Parliament in 2003, prior to the US invasion of Iraq, to grant permission to US troops to pass through Turkey en route to Iraq, and then the internment of Turkish soldiers in Sulaymania, in northern Iraq, by the US forces. The latter incident froze the relationship and led to rise of persistent anti-American sentiments in Turkey.[45] Though tension between the two countries was eased somewhat after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, the divergent policy lines remained, and has again deteriorated following the 16 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey.[46]

Along the way, the rise of ISIL and its rapid advance in Iraq and Syria from summer 2014 onwards had created a dangerous security vacuum at the core of the region and induced a US-led coalition to begin airstrikes against the group in early August 2014. While the US hoped for Turkish military contribution to this effort, in addition to access to Turkey's İncirlik airbase, Turkey demurred, insisting that the coalition prioritize the removal of al-Assad and the creation of a buffer zone in northern Syria, and initially allowed İncirlik to be used only for logistical and humanitarian support. The alignment of positions between Turkey and the US took some time to achieve. The countries signed a protocol for the 'train-and-equip' program of the Syrian opposition on 19 February 2015 and an agreement that allowed coalition forces to use of İncirlik and Diyarbakır airbases for airstrikes on 23 July 2015. Despite these agreements, the two

(44) Alterman and Malka, "Shifting Eastern Mediterranean Geometry", p. 118.

(45) Füsun Türkmen, "Turkish-American Relations: A Challenging Transition", *Turkish Studies,* Vol. 10 (1), 2009, p. 123; Alan Makovsky, "U.S. Policy towards Turkey", Morton I. Abramowitz (ed.), *Turkey's Transformation and American Policy*, New York, The Century Foundation, 2000, p. 230.

(46) Kostas Ifantis, "The US and Turkey in the fog of Regional Uncertainty", *Hellenic Observatory Papers on Greece and Southeast Europe,* No 73, 2013, p. 15; Tolga Tanış, "10 Soruda Darbe Sonrası Washington-Ankara İlişkileri", *Hürriyet*, 19 July 2016, http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/10-soruda-darbe-sonrasi-washington-ankara-iliskileri-40154897 (Accessed 22 August 2016).

countries' goals continue to diverge, especially concerning the priority of operations and the ideal final outcome.

Finally, the US cooperation with the PKK-affiliated PYD/YPG from Autumn 2015 onwards, which turned the Kurdish groups into de-facto US ground forces in its war against ISIL, would put the two allies at loggerheads.[47] The US reliance on Kurdish groups in the region, in accordance with its 'no American boots on the ground' policy, has triggered Turkey's survival instinct as the country has been struggling with the terror challenge posed by the PKK since early 1980s. This fear of a an emboldened PKK, in addition to already existing ISIL threat, would motivate Turkey's two consecutive operations inside Syrian territory to fend developing PKK-related threats in border areas.

The Turkey-Israel part of the triangle has also suffered heavily since 2010. After Israeli soldiers killed Turkish activists in the *Mavi Marmara* raid, Turkey recalled its ambassador, cancelled joint military exercises, called for an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, and, shortly after the release of the UN Palmer Report in September 2011, expelled Israel's ambassador. Despite several attempts to patch up relations, a gridlock remained until US President Obama brokered an apology from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Prime Minister Erdoğan on 22 March 2013. The rapprochement between the two countries, though, had to wait the signing of an agreement on 26 June 2016 to normalize diplomatic relations.[48] Since then, while political relations between the two countries have suffered from occasional flare-ups, economic cooperation has continued unabated.

(47) Mustafa Aydın, "Operation Olive Branch", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 25 January 2018, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/mustafa-aydin/operation-olive-branch-126248 (Accessed 9 April 2018).

(48) "Turkey, Israel Sign Deal to Normalize Diplomatic Relations", *NBC News*, 28 June 2016, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/turkey-israel-sign-deal-normalize-diplomatic-relations-n600186 (Accessed 9 April 2018).

The problems in the US-Turkey-Israeli triangle have naturally affected the decision making in the region. While Israel had previously closely allied with Turkey on many international issues, with the downturn in the relations, it moved to cultivate closer relations with Greece and the RoC in an attempt to transfer the region's newly discovered offshore energy resources to Europe, bypassing Turkey.[49] But the realignment went beyond a simple cooperation to find a way to transfer regional riches. Thus, Israel and Greece conducted a joint military exercise in 2008, Israeli pilots were allowed to practice in Greek airspace, and the two countries signed a security cooperation agreement in 2011. The cooperation opened the way for Greece to attempt to fill the vacuum left by Turkey.[50]

As the US-Israel-Turkey triangle experienced troubles, Russia has been trying to increase its military presence in the Levant. While the military balance in the Levant favoured the West overwhelmingly, the hands-off policy of the Obama administration in Syria gave Russia a chance to return to the Middle Eastern to counter-balance western dominance in the region.[51] Although Russia had been aligned with the Syrian regime since the outbreak of the crisis, supporting Syrian diplomatic manoeuvres and supplying the regime with arms, the active involvement of Russia in the conflict, first evident in its military build-up in September 2015, has changed the equilibrium not only in Syria but also in the wider region. Intense Russian airstrikes halted the advance of both rebel groups and ISIL forces and eventually strengthened the regime. Furthermore, Turkey's downing of a Russian jet in November 2015 provided Russia with an opportunity to reinforce its forces with missiles and an additional

(49) Oğurlu, "Rising Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean", p. 6.

(50) Meliha Benli Altunışık, "The Eastern Mediterranean: Back to Power Politics", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 8 October 2011, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=the-eastern-mediterranean-back-to-power-politics-2011-09-08 (Accessed 4 Feburary 2014); Oğurlu, "Rising Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean", p. 7.

(51) Lutterbeck and Engelbrecht, "The West and Russia", p. 394.

airbase in Hmeimim. While its military presence and initiatives in Syria have provided Moscow a permanent foothold in the Levant, its pragmatic partnerships have also enhanced Russia's global posture.[52]

In the energy arena, too, Russia has tried to create an area of influence in the region by supporting the arguments of the RoC over exploration and licensing rights, as well as its unilateral declaration of EEZ. As a result, the Russian firm Novatek was among the companies bidding for the exploration licenses in the RoC's second tender in May 2012.[53]

The emergence of new non-state actors, such as ISIL, has also affected regional politics. The combined effect of the Arab uprisings, the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, the sectarian policies of the then Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and the civil war in Syria have all facilitated the emergence of ISIL as a key player. While several moves in different parts of the region by ISIL militants revealed its capacity to threaten wider regional and global security, organizing a suitable ground force to fight against it proved difficult and would eventually strengthen the role of Kurdish groups in northern Syria, providing them with leverage in the region. The involvement of other regional actors such as Iran and Saudi Arabia with their sectarian views has also complicated the regional politics. While the US-led international coalition's operations against ISIL both in Iraq and Syria have steadily weakened its position in the region, the continuing political instability of the region creates a fruitful space for the emergence of new non-state actors, affecting the policymaking abilities of all of the countries in the region.

(52) Mustafa Aydın, "Putin Reloded", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 8 March 2018, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/mustafa-aydin/putin-reloaded-128401 (Accessed 20 May 2018).
(53) Mehmet Öğütçü, "Rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean: The Turkish Dimension", *Mediterranean Policy Program*, Washington D.C., German Marshall Fund, 2012, p. 4.

Conclusion

Turkey's relations with the Levant started to develop in late 1990s and have improved significantly during successive JDP governments. The political transformation of the country and the emergence of new business communities, eager to operate in the region, have supported such change. As a result, the government developed innovative tools such as visa-liberalization, conflict mediation, jointly established industrial zones, free trade areas, and joint cabinet meetings to develop Turkey's relations with the region.

However, the emergence of new challenges following the Arab uprisings has limited Turkey's reach in the Levant. While the increased instability in the region affected Turkey's political relations with the countries of the Levant, sustained crises have also undermined its economic relationships. In the wake of the popular uprisings in the region, Turkey, despite its initial confusion, took the side of the masses against the existing regimes. However, as popular uprisings finally failed to gain the upper hand, especially in Egypt and Syria, Turkey's activism during the Arab uprisings has since led to weakening of Turkey's position in the Levant.

Moreover, Turkey's attraction to local populations and the countries had mainly stemmed from its democratic features and close relationship with the EU. As its democratic credentials increasingly came under suspicion in recent years and its relationship with the EU undermined, Turkey's appeal and leverage in the region has weakened. So much so that Turkey's political relations today with the Levant countries are not even as strong as the pre-Arab uprisings era, with the country maintaining only a decreased diplomatic representation in Syria, Egypt, and Israel. This diplomatic and political disconnect has undermined Turkey's economic connections as well. Under such conditions, while its geographic position at the centre of transportation routes for the region's recently discovered

off-shore natural resources might in the future assist Turkey in its ambition to become an energy hub in the Eastern Mediterranean, existing tensions with the regional countries hinder the realization of this goal. It is clear that, in order to affect regional developments to favour its long-term interests, Turkey needs to recalibrate its disorganised policies in the Levant.

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Understanding Tehran's Long Game in the Levant

Sanam Vakil

Introduction

Iran's increasing influence and interference in the Levant, seen through its support for Lebanese Hezbollah, Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and Palestinian groups such as Hamas, has been both an opportunity and a challenge for the Islamic Republic of Iran. The increase in Iranian ties to state and non-state actors has posed reputational costs for Tehran, but has also provided strategic depth and deterrence capabilities for the Islamic Republic. The result of which on the one hand has entrenched Tehran's reach and leverage in the Levant and on the other hand sparked calls from the international community, particularly the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel to limit the Islamic Republic's malign influence on the region.[1] The Trump Administration in the U.S., in concert with regional allies, seeks to reverse Iran's relevance and multifaceted influence.[2] Understanding Iran's diversified foreign relations strategy in the context of regional change can better explain Tehran's motivations as well as the challenges ahead.

(1) Afshon Ostovar, "Why its tough to get tough on Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, 25 October 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-10-25/why-its-tough-get-tough-iran (Accessed 18 September 2018).

(2) *Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy*, 13 October 2017, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy/ (Accessed 14 September 2018)

While Iran has had longstanding ties to the Levant, these connections have ebbed and expanded and been heavily influenced by regional events as well as changes in Iran's domestic political landscape and priorities. The evolution of Iranian linkages to the Levant can be categorized as multifaceted, diversified and strategic. Relations range from historical, political, economic, religious, and cultural linkages that have increased in scope and scale since the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a means to expand and extend Iranian influence beyond its borders. Specifically, Iran's relations with Syria and with the Lebanese group Hezbollah have been the nexus linking Tehran, Damascus and Beirut. Moral, financial and military support for Palestinian groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) have played an important role too, as has the presence and use of militia and proxy groups sponsored by Tehran in the aforementioned countries.[3] Although these relationships have not always been strong or consistent, this axis has proven resilient to the pressures of time, regional events and international opposition. Common goals of security, regime stability and relevance as well as anti-Israeli and anti-American animus have united these actors and maintained Tehran's reach into the Levant.

Regional events have also provided Tehran with opportunities to increase its foothold. From 2001 to 2009, Tehran gained much traction throughout the region by taking advantage of frustration on the Arab street over the pervasive nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the U.S. policy towards the Middle East following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks that resulted in the 2001 Afghan war and 2003 invasion of Iraq. Tehran benefitted from the removal of two erstwhile enemies —Saddam Hussein and the Taliban — in its neighboring states of Iraq and Afghanistan. In both countries, in order to counter the U.S. presence, Tehran implemented a deftly implemented diversified strategy, supporting state

(3) Kenneth Kenneth, "Iran's foreign and defence policies", *Congressional Research Service Report*, No 22, 2017, http://www.refworld.org/docid/59e8856e4.html (Accessed September 23, 2017).

and non-state actors.[4] During this period, Iranian support for Hezbollah proved decisive in the 2006 Lebanon War,[5] where Hezbollah was able to hold off Israeli attacks. Popular support for Hezbollah and Iran soared on the streets of the Middle East and Tehran was buoyed by its successful regional approach.

The tide turned against Iran after its domestic crackdown following the 2009 Green Movement protests. Another shift for Tehran was the conclusion of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or Iran nuclear agreement signed between Iran and the countries known as the P5+1 (the 5 members of the UN Security Council plus Germany).[6] The transactional agreement resulted in Iranian compromises to its nuclear energy program in exchange for sanctions relief, but was perceived by regional actors as an opportunity for greater Iranian empowerment at the expense of Saudi Arabia, Israel and other Persian Gulf countries.[7] The outbreak of the 2011 Arab Spring protests was another critical turning point. With violence impacting Iran's longtime Syrian ally, Iran chose to stand by Assad — a decisive strategic calculation that would have wider sectarian consequences.

These shifts both challenged and increased Iran's sense of security and provided the Islamic Republic with unique circumstances to increase its regional footprint. The consequences of Iranian involvement in Syria

(4) Afshon Ostovar, "Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2016, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEIP_CP288_Ostovar_Sectarianism_Final.pdf (10 Accessed September 2017)

(5) Emile Hokayem, "Iran and Lebanon," Robin Wright (ed.), *The Iran Primer; Power, Politics, and US Policy,* Washington D.C., United States Institute for Peace Press, 2010, pp. 178-181.

(6) "Implementing the Iran Nuclear Deal: A Status Report," *International Crisis Group*, Report No 173, 16 January 2017, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/173-implementing-iran-nuclear-deal-status-report (Accessed 29 August 2017).

(7) Ibid.

however have spilled over, unleashing wider sectarian and regional challenges. As the conflict has waged on, Iran's justification for its activities in Syria has shifted, taking on existential dimensions for Tehran. Seven years after the outbreak of the conflict, it remains to be seen if Iran's investment and support for the Assad regime will pay off.

This chapter will present a strategic view of Tehran's engagement in the Levant as well as a historical one. Taken together, Tehran's strategy, threat perceptions, history in the Levant and current standing on the ground are key to deciphering its current and future engagement in the wider Levantine theatre.

Historical Backdrop

Iran has had deep historical ties to the Levant. These ties have ebbed and flowed through the cycles of history as empires have risen and receded. Important to note is the durability and evolutionary nature of these relations. During the Achaemenid and Phoenician times from 539 to 332 BC, trade and political interests brought Iranian influence to the Mediterranean. The Phoenician coastal city-states of Tyre, Sidon, Byblos and Arvad were launching grounds for Persian-Hellenic battles. Indeed, the Phoenicians, capitalizing early on their skill as traders, benefited from the vastness of the Persian Empire.[8] Under the Safavid Shahs, Shia clergy from the mountains of Jabil Amil immigrated to Persia taking part in a Safavid conversionary mission that gradually brought Shia Islam to Iran. This mutually beneficial relationship was marked by the assistance and, more importantly, the legitimization that the Shiite religious leaders granted to the Safavid dynasty. Indeed, a *quid pro quo* of sorts developed

(8) Houchang Chehabi and Hassan I. Mneimneh, "Five Centuries of Lebanese-Iranian Encounters," in Chehabi (ed)., *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2006, p. 2.

between the clergy and the crown: The Lebanese clerics legitimized Safavid dynastic rule in exchange for clerical influence over conversion and education.[9]

Beyond the clerical migration that laid the foundation for this relationship was the constant student moves to the region. Iranian students began to attend the alluring Protestant and Jesuit colleges that had opened in the Levant; "Going to study in Beirut was for a young Iranian a way to get a modern Western education without leaving the Muslim world."[10] Many of the Iranian elite from the Hoveyda brothers to Shapour Bakhtiar[11] studied in Beirut. The city was a multicultural, pluralistic landscape that opened avenues to both the East and West. Over the years, Beirut provided refuge to many of Iran's political and religious activists. The Bahai community found sanctuary among Lebanon's Cedars, as did many opponents of the Pahlavi Mohammad Reza Shah.[12]

While Mohammad Reza Pahlavi pursued a foreign policy based on *realpolitik*, Iran's Shia connections also played a part in his international relations. The shah maintained contact with prominent Shia such as Musa al Sadr, as well as the Maronite community of Lebanon, which also quietly encouraged Shia empowerment in Iran. Similar to Iran's use of Hezbollah today, the reliance on Maronite Christian leaders[13] for its own purposes reveals the importance of pragmatic, strategic interests. These ties were limited, however, by the tide of Arab nationalism that swept over the country.[14]

(9) Ibid pp. 3-7.

(10) Ibid, p. 14.

(11) Amir Abbas Hoveyda and Shahpour Bakhtiar were two Iranian prime ministers.

(12) Richard Hollinger, "An Iranian Enclave in Lebanon: Bahai Students in Beirut, 1906-40" in Chehabi (ed.), *Distant Relations*, pp. 96-98.

(13) During this period, Lebanese Christians and Shia found common cause in opposing Palestinian, Arab nationalist forces and Sunni groups in Lebanon.

(14) For more on this period, see Abbas William Samii, "The Security Relationship between Lebanon and Pre-revolutionary Iran," in Chehabi (ed.), *Distant Relation,* pp. 162-179.

Needless to say, the Shah's support of the Shia cleric Musa al-Sadr represents the quintessential link between the two countries.[15] Musa Sadr, while born in Qom, traced his lineage back to the Jabil Amili clerics who migrated to Iran during the Safavid era. Sadr eagerly returned to the land of his ancestors as an Iranian clerical envoy in 1959.[16] While Sadr and oppositionists[17] were struggling to advance their own interests amidst the wider regional political struggles in Palestine, Lebanon and Iran, Sadr directed his effort towards Shia empowerment in 1974, founding *Amal* or hope to assist the Movement of the Disinherited.[18] The groups' military wing was formed during the Lebanese Civil War and lives on today as one of the two Shia political parties in Lebanon. Indeed, the inter-Shia squabbles between Sadr, the Shah and Khomeini reveal much about the tension and ideological disunity that existed within the pre-1979 revolutionary movement.[19]

Iranian revolutionaries sought refuge in Lebanon inspired by Palestinian and Shia activism during this time. From Mostafa Chamran, who worked intimately with Sadr through the revolution, to Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, who assisted in the creation of Hezbollah, the Iranian dissidents used the linkages between the two societies to plant an Iranian foothold in the hills of Jabil Amil.[20] It was through these bonds that Iran gained further entrée into Lebanon in the aftermath of its 1979 Islamic revolution.

(15) For more on Musa al Sadr see Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon,* Cornell, Cornell University Press, 2000.

(16) Ibid., p. 23.

(17) Iranian exiles along with Palestinian groups such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) became active in Lebanon in the 1960s and 1970s taking advantage of the weak Lebanese government and geographic diversity to assert their political agendas.

(18) Houchang Chehabi and Majid Tafreshi, "Musa Sadr and Iran," in Chehabi (ed.), *Distant Relations,* p. 155.

(19) Andrew Scott Cooper, *The Fall of Heaven: The Pahlavis and the Final Days of the Imperial Iran,* New York Henry Holt & Co, 2016 provides rigorous detail on this relationship.

(20) Houchang Chehabi, "The Anti-Shah Opposition and Lebanon," in Chehabi (ed.), *Distant Relations,* pp. 182-188.

Understanding Iran's Strategic Worldview since 1979

Important to this narrative is Iran's regional foreign policy that has been driven by its history, post-revolutionary ideology of independence, and by domestic political considerations. These themes form the backbone of Iran's strategy in the Middle East. The Islamic Republic's primary impulses consist of regime preservation and the restoration of Iran's regional relevance. While the former is drawn from Iran's post revolutionary history, the latter has been a continuous trend in Iranian policy since the days of the Pahlavi monarchy, predating the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Issues of regime security however are most poignantly rooted in the national memory of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War where Iran's neighbors, the United States and many European countries collectively supported Iraq against Iran.[21] During this period, which dovetailed with the consolidation of the Revolution, Iran experienced regional and international isolation and encirclement that instituted a profound sense of security paranoia among the political elite. Continued U.S. opposition to the Islamic Republic and implicit support for regime change in Tehran, evidenced in statements such as "all options remain on the table," has fueled this paranoia.[22] President Trump's recent Iran strategy goes over further; "It is time for the entire world to join us in demanding that Iran's government end its pursuit of death and destruction."[23] After decades of perpetual enmity with the U.S, Iran's sense of strategic isolation is now imbued in the national political culture and seen in the dominant themes

(21) Syria was the only regional country that supported Iran during the war. Oman declared its neutrality in the conflict.

(22) Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iran/U.S.: Bush Says All Options On The Table For Tehran 's Nuclear Program," *Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty*, 18 January 2005, https://www.rferl.org/a/1056924.html (Accessed 20 September 2017).

(23) *President Donald J. Trump's New Strategy on Iran*, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-new-strategy-iran/ 13 October 2017 (Accessed 12 November 2017).

of political, national and economic resistance. In the same context, the notion of resistance is also played out in the region through Tehran's axis of resistance bringing together Hezbollah and Syria in a nexus.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's foreign policy orientation has been predicated on the concept of independence. The revolutionary slogans of 'independence, freedom and the Islamic Republic' and 'neither East nor West' were emblematic of this ideology and vision. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the revolutionary founding father of Iran's new political system, captured this philosophy stating, "If we cannot live up to the tough measure of 'neither East nor West' and have not made Iran truly independent, then we have not achieved anything."[24]

Part of Iran's quest for independence is tied to the belief that the U.S. presence and involvement in Iran and the wider Middle East has been decidedly negative and designed to contain Iran. From Tehran's perspective, this is evidenced in the unstable outcome of the regional wars such as the 1980 Iran-Iraq war, 1990 Persian Gulf war, the 2001 Afghan war, the 2003 Iraq war, 2012 Libya campaign, and support for the 2015 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) led Yemen war.[25] Based on this interpretation of regional history, Iranian understanding espouses that the Middle Eastern security should be managed from within the region rather than through U.S. interference and balancing efforts.[26] This vision contrasts that of Saudi Arabia and GCC states that have traditionally relied on the U.S. to protect their security interests. This strategic difference is among the many exacerbating tensions between Riyadh and Tehran,

(24) Quoted in Farhang Rajaee, "Why Alone?" in Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi (eds.,) *Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001: Alone in the World*, London, Routledge, 2013.

(25) Seyyed Hossein Mousavian, "What Trump Needs to Know About Iran," *Huffington Post*, January 1, 2017 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-iran-facts_us_586fb7bae4b02b5f85886829?guccounter=1 (Accessed 25 September 2017).

(26) Saudi Arabia by contrast sought U.S. regional protection as a counterweight to Iran.

ultimately also impacting relations in the Levant where both countries have supported opposing groups, parties and individuals.[27]

To offset the increased American regional presence, demonstrated most recently in the 2001 US led war on terror and 2003 Iraq war, Iran has worked through a strategy of diplomatic, economic, religious, and military support for state and non-state actors. After years of sanctions and arms embargoes, Iran's military capability is weaker than that of its neighbors. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), "data make[s] a conclusive case that the Arab Gulf states have an overwhelming advantage of Iran in both military spending and access to modern arms."[28] Although Iran's capabilities are strengthened by its ballistic missile program, Tehran's primary military strength stems from its asymmetric and deterrent strategy that relies on the irregular warfare and support for proxy and non-state actors.[29] While Tehran views this 'forward defence strategy' as protective, Iran's neighbors see Tehran as expansionist and aggressive, thereby exacerbating regional tensions.[30]

(27) Sanam Vakil, *The American Shadow over the Iranian Elections,* Report, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 18 May 2017, https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/american-shadow-over-iranian-elections-16509 (Accessed 22 September 2017).

(28) Anthony Cordesman, "*Military Spending and Arms Sales in the Gulf: How the Arab Gulf States Dominate the Changes in the Military Balance*," Report, Center for Strategic International Studies, 24 April 2014 , https://www.csis.org/analysis/military-spending-and-arms-sales-gulf (Accessed 25 September 2017).

(29) Aram Nerguizian, "*The Struggle for the Levant: Geopolitical Battles and the Quest for Stability*," CSIS, 18 September 2014, p. 245. https://www.csis.org/analysis/struggle-levant-geopolitical-battles-and-quest-stability (Accessed 30 September 2017).

(30) Ali Vaez, "Trump Can't Deal with Iran if He Doesn't Understand It," *Foreign Policy,* 23 February 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/23/trump-cant-deal-with-iran-if-he-doesnt-understand-it/ (Accessed 17 September 2017).

Iran's Evolving Regional Strategy

Over a number of decades, Tehran has built on these relationships using a multipronged regional strategy. Important to Iran's regional approach is the domestic narrative and vision justifying Tehran's presence abroad. Pan-Islamism, strategic depth and counter terror justifications are three of the most relevant pillars that have been used by Tehran to overcome regional divides and explain Iran's growing visibility.[31] These narratives are regularly invoked by Iran's foreign policy establishment to explain its regional goals and strategic objectives. It is however important to note here is that Tehran is opportunistic as a foreign policy actor. It is only able to exert its influence through the mistakes and missteps of other regional players. In most circumstances, Tehran has capitalized on opportunities left by the vacuum and withdrawal of the US, and the Islamic Republic has proven to be adept at taking advantage of regional events such as the 2003 Iraq war and 2011 Syrian Civil War.

Unlike other regional powers, Iran pursues a diversified "whole of government" long term approach, cultivating relations with state and non-state actors.[32] This strategy, as articulated by the Iranian foreign policy establishment, uses a mix of political support and relationships at the diplomatic level, soft power activities of trade and investment, cultural and religious ties, as well as the creation and training of militia groups.[33] Tehran implemented this strategy most effectively after the 2003 Iraq war by building a diversified network with leaders from Shia, Kurdish and Sunni groups at a political level, while also building its soft power influence

(31) Katzman, 2017.

(32) Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights and Ahmad Ali, "Iran's Influence in Iraq: Countering Iran's Whole of Government Approach," Policy Focus, No. 11, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2011, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus111.pdf (Accessed 14 September 2017).

(33) Ibid., pp. ix-xi.

through increased trade and religious ties. Military relations and sustained support for militia groups known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have been instrumental in further cementing Iranian influence throughout the country. For Tehran, creating indispensable ties beyond its borders would provide strategic lines of defense and influence. After the outbreak the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Iran would replicate this approach with even greater rigor.

The Pillar of Strategic Depth

Iran's forward defence strategy is based on the concept of strategic depth. To compensate for its sense of encirclement by U.S. forces and pro-U.S. states and its inferior conventional military capacity compared with that of its neighbours, Iran has carefully cultivated a diverse array of regional relationships to push threats away from its borders.[34] The Iranian military establishment has publicly acknowledged this strategy. Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Deputy Commander Brigadier General Hossein Salami has commented that Iran's military is present in Iraq and Syria, because of "[Iran's] strategic depth, and their security is Iran's security."[35]

Strategic depth is attained through diversified, mutual relationships in multiple arenas. The countries of the Levant, as neighbours to Israel, have played a particular role in providing Iran with such depth by allowing Tehran to extend its influence through relations with state and non-state actors. Here Iran has maintained longstanding ties with the Syrian state. At the same time, it has cultivated a network of non-state groups. Part of

(34) Gawdat Baghat and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Iran's Defense Strategy: The Navy, Ballistic Missiles and Cyberspace*, Vol. 24 (3), Fall 2017, pp. 89–103.

(35) Sardar Salimi, "Iran considers Syria, Iraq as its 'strategic depth': IRGC deputy cmdr", *Mehr News Agency,* 4 February 2018, https://www.mehrnews.com/ (Accessed 1 October 2017).

the success of Iran's support for non-state actors is that such support is predicated on Iran's tolerance of each partner's domestic priorities. Iran perceives the unconditional nature of its support as the strength behind these relationships.[36] Iran does not dictate nor maintain the upper hand in these relationships, but rather recognizes local autonomy and local priorities of each group. Each relationship is unique. Some groups claim to support Iran's model of Islamic government known as the *velayate-faqih,*[37] but by no means, is it a prerequisite of Iranian support.

The case of Hezbollah is a good example to draw upon. For decades, Iran has provided Hezbollah with significant economic and military support. Hezbollah's stronghold on the Israeli-Lebanese border has from Tehran's perspective protected Iran from an Israeli attack, giving the Islamic Republic greater leverage and a *de facto* presence in the Levant. Hezbollah claims to support the *velayat-e-faqih,* but there is clarity among them that this model is not an appropriate system of governance for Lebanon.[38] However, "Support for Hezbollah does not necessarily translate into allegiance to or unequivocal support for Iran… Hezbollah's power also relies on its standing at home and regional image, both of which have suffered from appearing to be a mere proxy of Iran."[39] Tehran has also privately stated that Hezbollah's decision to enter the 2011 Syrian Civil War was made independently of Iran.[40] Under such conditions, proxies

(36) Vaez, "Trump can't deal with Iran".

(37) The *Velayat-e -faqih*, Iran's form of Islamic government invented by Ayatollah Ruhullah Khomeini is based on the concept of rule of a clerical jurisprudent. The model is designed to provide an ideal Islamic system of government based on social justice. Under such a system, the leading clerical authority, or Supreme Leader, rules in absence of the 12th Shia Imam who went into occultation in the 12th century. For more on this system see Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, New York, Basic Books, 1990.

(38) Hokayem, 2010.

(39) Ibid.

(40) "Hezbollah's Syrian Conundrum," International Crisis Group, Report No 175, 14 March 2017 https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/175-hizbollah-s-syria-conundrum (Accessed 24 September 2017).

and partners do not always act in accordance with Iranian interests. Yet, the mere presence of the network does present Tehran with a strengthened level of influence and potential for leverage should it be necessary.

Iran provides diverse support for non-state actors in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan and Palestine. In addition to Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, the Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KHA), Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), and Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA) in Syria, Hamas and PIJ in Palestine are some of the organizations that have benefitted from Iranian patronage. These relationships, while not equal nor as successful to that of Hezbollah, seek to provide similar levers of influence while also deterring and challenging Iran's adversaries. Ultimately, they give Tehran access and relevance beyond its borders.

The Pillars of Pan-Islamism & the Axis of Resistance

Iran's pan-Islamic orientation promoted in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution was designed as a policy to build bridges between Tehran and its regional neighbors as co-religionists.[41] Through the prism of opposition to Israel, Tehran sought to appeal to wider Arab and Muslim sentiments on Palestinian self-determination. Unable to develop meaningful relations and alliances with its neighbors, most of whom felt threatened by Iran's post-revolutionary ideology and plans to export its revolution, Tehran cultivated a network with non-state actors. This strategy led Iran to support the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, PIJ, the Al Quds Brigade, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) among others to

(41) Mehdi Khalaji, "Dilemmas of Pan-Islamic Unity," The Hudson Institute, 27 November 2009, https://www.hudson.org/research/9859-the-dilemmas-of-pan-islamic-unity- (Accessed 12 October 2017)

create an axis of resistance against Israel.[42]

Iran has long pledged military and financial support for Palestinian groups — reportedly $30 million annually — as well as advanced military training for thousands of Hamas activists at Revolutionary Guard bases in Iran and Lebanon.[43] In 2011, Hamas had opened an office in Tehran and declared that Iran and Hamas shared an "identical view in the strategic outlook toward the Palestinian cause in its Islamic dimension."[44] Iran has also supported PIJ and reportedly provided military aid and training for dozens of men in Hamas' military wing, the Izz ad-Din al Qassam Brigades.[45] Iran also allegedly supplied much of the military equipment that Hamas used against Israel during its Operation Cast Lead in the December 2008.[46] Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal visited Tehran in February 2009, after the operation ended, to thank Iran for its help during the conflict, citing Iran as a "partner in victory."[47]

But the eruption of the Syrian civil war in 2011 caused a rift between Tehran and Hamas. Although they had previously overlooked sectarian differences, the relationship became complicated when Tehran backed Syrian President Bashar al Assad, from the Alawite sect, and Hamas aligned with Sunni rebels. In 2012, Hamas began looking to Qatar as an alternative financial backer and its leaders relocated to Qatar from Syria. However, with Assad in a stronger military position in 2018, relations

(42) *Annual Report on the Military Power of Iran*, Washington D.C., Department of Defense, 2012.

(43) Rachel Brandenburg, "Iran and the Palestinians", *The Iran Primer,* January 25, 2016 http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-palestinians (Accessed 15 September 2017).

(44) Karl Yambert, *Security Issues in the Greater Middle East,* New York Prager, March 31, 2016, p. 64.

(45) Brandenburg, 2016.

(46) Yambert, *Security Issues in the Greater Middle East*, p. 133.

(47) Mathew Levitt, "Iran's Support for Terrorism under the JCPOA," *Policywatch,* No 2648, Washington Institute, 8 July 2016, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-support-for-terrorism-under-the-jcpoa (Accessed 25 September 2017).

between the parties are warming again, suggesting that the pragmatic nature of the relationship might have won out.

The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and the increase of regional sectarian politics, however, have exposed the limits of Iran's pan-Islamic policy. Pan-Islamism has failed to provide Iran with sustained regional support and legitimacy, especially because Tehran is perceived to have supported Bashar al Assad against the will of the Syrian people. Tension between Tehran and Hamas over Iran's support for Bashar al Assad led to the fracturing of the resistance coalition for a period of time. Wider Arab, GCC and Saudi opposition to Iran's regional expansionism have also ruptured Iran's credibility and pan-Islamic cover. As such, Tehran has been forced to pivot away from an ideological justification for its presence in Syria towards national interests.

Lebanon's Hezbollah and Syria were also part of this multi-confessional alignment, the heart of which came to be known as the resistance axis, which has united them together with Iran in an anti-Israeli and anti-American alliance. Drawing from the strength of Hezbollah's 2006 victory against Israel and opportunities to exert influence in post-war Iraq, the axis has grown as part of a "transnational, multi-ethnic, and cross-confessional political and security network."[48] The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, coupled with the emergence of ISIS in 2014, however, has forced the resistance axis to rebrand itself inadvertently in sectarian terms. Doing so has enabled them to attract Shia recruits in the fight against Sunni extremism. At the same time, taking the lead in the fight against ISIS' terror has enabled the Islamic Republic to "widen their appeal of resistance to non-Islamic religions and minorities in the region, such as Christians, the Druze, Yazidis, and Kurds, as well as to secular regimes,

(48) Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, "Iran's Axis of Resistance: How its forging a new Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, 24 January 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-01-24/irans-axis-resistance-rises (Accessed 3 October 2017).

such as Egypt, as an attractive partner for fighting terrorism."[49] The cost of this strategy has exposed Iran to sectarian criticism but at the same has enabled Iran to pivot towards the "war on terror narrative" to justify its increased regional role.[50]

The Pillar of Counter Terrorism

Due to limitations of the Pan-Islamist and axis of resistance strategies and in conjunction with the emergence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, Iran reframed its regional narrative by attempting to position itself at the forefront of the "global war on terror." By shifting public statements and its focus towards combating the presence of ISIS and *takfiri* groups,[51] Tehran attempted to pivot away from solely supporting the Assad regime. The geographical and ideological success of ISIS posed a strategic challenge for Tehran. In 2014, ISIS' territory extended to a fifty-mile distance to the Iranian border. Tehran also worried about ISIS' potential to recruit among Iran's disgruntled and marginalized Sunni population. Thus with this strategic shift, Iran has tried to justify its military presence in Iraq and Syria both regionally and for a domestic audience. At the same time, this strategy also served to challenge the GCC position of perceived support for terror groups. ISIS' direct targeting of Iran and Shia groups added fuel to Iran's counter terror efforts.

The fight against terror has validated increased security and anti-terror measures over Tehran's own domestic minority groups. Under the umbrella of the leading sponsor of counter-terrorism, Iran sought to stand up to terror to ultimately protect its regional interests and to

(49) Ibid.

(50) Arianne Tabatabai, "Other side of the Iranian coin: Iran's counterterrorism apparatus", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41 (1-2), 2018, pp. 181-207.

(51) Muslim groups who accuse other Muslims of apostasy.

prevent terror groups from operating within Iranian territory.[52] Kurdish support for Salafi jihadi ideology has increased in Iran since 2001,[53] as was evidenced by the June 2017 terror attacks in Tehran.[54] Despite government efforts to stave off attacks inside Iran, in June 2017, ISIS carried out two simultaneous attacks on symbolic institutions: Iran's parliament and mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, leaving 17 civilians dead. Many Iranian Sunnis have travelled through Turkey to join ISIS and other jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria, often facing the IRGC commanders aiding Iraqi and Syrian forces on the front lines.[55]

Historical Links since 1979

In tandem with the strategic vision guiding its foreign policy, a historical approach is also useful to explain the growth and expansion of Iran's ties to the Levant. The 1979 Iranian Revolution cemented Iran's link to Lebanon. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), a time of regional isolation for Tehran, Khomeini saw Lebanon as the ideal outlet for successfully exporting Iran's "model".[56] Tehran's crowning achievement was the 1982 creation and 1985 institutionalization of Hezbollah or Party of God.[57] The

(52) Tabatabai, 2018.

(53) Fazel Hawramay, "Iran's Jihadi Gambit," *Al Monitor*, 10 January 2018. https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/iran-jihadi-gambit.html (Accessed 15 October 2017).

(54) Ibid.

(55) Fazel Hawramay, "How Iran's Military Strategy Against IS May Backfire", *Al Monitor*, 17 April 2017. https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/iran-islamic-state-kurdistan-recruitment-jihadism-at-home.html (Accessed 12 October 2017).

(56) Mohammad Ataie, "Revolutionary Iran's 1979 Endeavor in Lebanon", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XX, Summer 2013, https://www.mepc.org/revolutionary-irans-1979-endeavor-lebanon (Accessed 10 October 2017).

(57) Differing accounts on the emergence of Hezbollah exist with some scholars pinpointing 1982 as the founding year while others believe that in 1985 Shia groups unified under the banner of Hezbollah. For more on Hezbollah, see Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah A Short History,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009.

IRGC provided the model, method and money to create Hezbollah in Iran's image.[58] Hezbollah served as a political, charitable and military group within the Lebanese polity, whose mission was directed to empowering Lebanese Shia and countering Israel's presence in southern Lebanon. To counter Israeli forces that had invaded Lebanon in 1982, Hezbollah and Amal, from 1983 onwards, launched asymmetric attacks in the form of suicide bombings, assassination attempts and kidnappings. Hezbollah was also responsible for the 1983 and 1984 American embassy bombings in Beirut and for regular attacks Israeli military posts in southern Lebanon until its withdrawal in 1985.[59]

The Hezbollah-Iran nexus cannot be understood in a vacuum, and analysis must also include the prism of the Syria-Lebanon-Iran triangle. The triangle has grown in reaction to regional events. Iran and Syria, to the surprise of many, developed a rather resilient alliance in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Both countries were regionally isolated and came together opportunistically against the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein in 1979.[60] Damascus and Tehran also experienced a deterioration of relations with the United States during this period.[61] At the outset of the war, Iran was regionally isolated as all neighbouring Arab states, threatened by the Iranian revolutionary ideology, supported Iraq during the war. It was Hafez al Assad's regime that provided military, intelligence and diplomatic support, enabling Iran to expel Iraqi forces from Iranian territory in 1982. For Tehran, the relationship also helped broaden its network beyond sectarian actors.

(58) Steven Ward, "Axis of Resistance: The Hezbollah-Iran-Syria Relationship", *The Cipher Brief,* 14 June 2016, https://www.thecipherbrief.com/axis-of-resistance-the-hezbollah-iran-syria-relationship (Accessed 12 October 2017).

(59) Emile Hokayem, "Iran and Lebanon," in *The Iran Primer,* United States Institute for Peace, 2015.

(60) Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power in the Politics of the Middle East*, London I. B. Tauris, 2009, p. 58.

(61) Ibid.

Throughout the 1980s, the relationship expanded beyond the Iraqi theatre when the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 challenged Syria's foothold in that country.[62] With Assad's blessing, Iran helped mobilize and organize Shia groups against the Israeli presence, resulting in the emergence of Hezbollah. Through the remaining war years, with Syrian support, Iran was able to remain active and physically present in Lebanon. Syria too benefitted from Iran's relationship with Shiite groups and used their nascent ties to support anti-Israeli and anti-American policies.[63]

By the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the Syrian-Iranian axis evolved and adapted to the geopolitical realities of the day. The demise of the USSR, the emergence of Pax-Americana and the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait provided new fodder, keeping the relationship alive. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait provided an opportunity for both Tehran and Damascus to improve relations with their Arab neighbours.[64] Despite the conclusion of the Lebanese Civil War and the 1989 Taif Accords,[65] Tehran and Damascus maintained their inter-Lebanese links. With Syrian backing, Hezbollah, unlike other militias, was permitted to remain armed. As a result, while publically renouncing its sectarian agenda and becoming a viable political player in Lebanese politics, Hezbollah was simultaneously able to maintain guerrilla tactics against Israel. Thus, throughout the 1990s, Hezbollah resisted Israeli attacks and gained moral strength and support as a party and a movement. This strategy helped facilitate the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000.

(62) Syria invaded Lebanon in 1976 during the Lebanese Civil War and remained as a political actor in the country until its forced departure in 2005. Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon: 1970-1985*, Cornell, Cornell Univeristy Press, 1985.

(63) Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, pp. 60-61.

(64) Ibid. p. 75.

(65) Two UNSC resolutions have since called for the disarmament of Hezbollah. Resolution 1559 of 2004 calls for "the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias," and resolution 1701 of 2006 calls for "the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that ... there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese state". See "Security Council Calls for the Disarming of Hezbollah," United National Security Council Press Release, August 11, 2006 https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8808.doc.htm

Military cooperation among the axis continued afterwards. Since then, Damascus and Tehran have engaged in ballistic missile development and used their access to military technology to fund and funnel weapons to Hezbollah and Palestinian groups.[66] Iran has also transferred much weaponry to Hezbollah. Doing so has enabled it to maintain proximity to Israel where deter an Israeli attack. Indeed, the Islamic Republic believes that its support for Hezbollah has protected Iran from Israeli attack, particularly during Iran's standoff over its nuclear program.[67] Thus, Hezbollah's arsenal has expanded through the years. While it had 15,000 missiles in 2006,[68] today it is believed it has 130,000.[69]

The Hezbollah leadership subscribes to Ayatollah Khomeini's model of Islamic governance known as the *velayat-e-faqih,* but recognizes the limitations of applying this model within the Lebanese polity. Hezbollah has long used its struggle against Israel as justification for its existence and continued military capabilities.[70] Tehran, having nurtured this proxy in its own ideological image, is thought to have significant political influence on the actions of Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah.[71] Elected to parliament in 1992, Hezbollah has transformed into a legitimate and successful political party representative of the Shia in

(66) Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, p. 87.

(67) Israel threatened to attack Iranian nuclear sites on numerous occasions. See, Jubin M. Goodarzi, "Radicalism or Realpolitik?: The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Babylon: The Nordic Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 8, (2), 2010, p. 88; and Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, p. xiv.

(68) "Three-Way Bet: Hizbullah's Strategic Dilemma in Lebanon," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, November 2011, p. 30. http://www.janes.com/images/assets/885/68885/Hizbullahs_expanded_role_in_Syria_threatens_Israel.pdf (Accessed 15 September 2017).

(69) "Israel raises Hezbollah rocket estimate to 150,000", *Times of Israel*, 12 November 2015. https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-raises-hezbollah-rocket-estimate-to-150000/ (Accessed 27 September 2017).

(70) Emile Hokayem, "Iran and Lebanon," The Iran Primer, USIP, October 11, 2010.

(71) Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, Syria and Iran: *Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System,* London, Routledge, 2002, p. 140.

Lebanon's multi-confessional system. It has held repeated positions in the government since 2005 and has expanded its activities to include social welfare provisions as a means to increase popular support within the Shia community. Its television station *Al Manar* broadcasts Hezbollah propaganda.

Economic, energy and military cooperation has also been essential to the Tehran - Damascus relationship. Bound by a number of bilateral economic agreements, Tehran has used its position of strength vis-à-vis Damascus to bolster relations. Energy, trade, banking and electricity cooperation, while not overwhelming, have laid the foundation for moderate economic ties. It was reported that Iran invested over $1 billion in foreign direct investment to Syria in 2008 alone.[72] While hard to measure the impact, educational, cultural and religious links have also been part of the relationship.

Both Iran and Syria shared similar concerns about the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. While they celebrated the removal of Saddam Hussein, Tehran and Damascus feared the impact and scope of the "war on terror" and tried to balance against American gains by supporting an array of Iraqi political and informal groups.[73] Tehran perceived its diversified strategy of support for state and non-state actors in Iraq as a success to be replicated in other contexts.[74]

(72) "Iranian Influence in the Levant: Egypt Iraq and Afghanistan," *American Enterprise Institute Report for the Institute of War*, May 2012, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianInfluenceLevantEgyptIraqAfghanistan.pdf (Accessed 10 September 2017).

(73) Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, p. 293.

(74) Eisenstadt, Knights and Ali, 2011.

The Syrian Civil War

The opportunity emerged in the 2011 Arab Spring protests and the following eruption of violence in Syria. The quick spread of the war throughout Syria forced Tehran to make a critical choice to support Assad. Tehran's decision lead to deeper expansion and investment in the Levant and a cementing of ties between Hezbollah, Damascus and Tehran into the 'axis of resistance."[75] Nevertheless, Tehran took months to gamble on Assad. Internal debates weighed the consequences of supporting Assad versus the prospect of losing Iran's longstanding ally.[76] Tehran also miscalculated, believing that its military and tactical support would lead to a quick resolution of the conflict. For Tehran, having an ally in Damascus was critical to maintaining access to Hezbollah where it could project power on the Israeli border. Also, Tehran sought to protect the *status quo ante* through preservation of Syrian territorial integrity.[77] A third motivation for Iran's involvement was fear that instability in Syria would have a domino effect in Lebanon and Iraq, weakening Iranian influence regionally. The ability to also lead in the fight against ISIS bolstered Tehran's credibility in its domestic arena.

Thus, Iran initially responded in 2012 by quietly sending aid, loans, military support and equipment to bolster Assad's defence. Over time, that support increased to include a more overt military presence of the IRGC. The role of the IRGC intelligence and training in Syria has become especially critical.[78] Drawing from its experience in Iraq, the IRGC has helped to create the National Defense Forces (NDF) — a group of nearly

(75) Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, "Iran's Axis of Resistance: How its forging a new Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, 24 January 2017.

(76) Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, "Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict," Occasional Paper, London, RUSI, August 2016, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201608_op_understanding_irans_role_in_the_syrian_conflict_0.pdf (Accessed 21 September 2017).

(77) Ibid.

(78) To date, the IRGC has acknowledged the loss of 2,100 fighters in this war.

80,000 Alawites, Shiites, and regime loyalists — to assist the Syrian army in combat.[79] *Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas* (LAFA) is perhaps the most important Iranian proxy in Syria. It first made its appearance in the fall of 2012, fighting under the pretense of defending the Sayideh Zainab Shrine and surrounding Shia neighborhoods in southern Damascus.[80] To assist overextended forces in Syria, the IRGC also developed the *Fatimaiyun Brigade,* composed of between 3,000 and 13,000 Afghan immigrants. The *Zaynabiyun Brigade*, an analogous unit, is composed of several hundred to a few thousand Shia Pakistanis based in Iran.[81] Israeli officials have estimated that Iran has over 80,000 militiamen under its command in Syria.[82] While Tehran's strategy and future plans for these militias are unknown, one could assume that they could be used to replicate the Hezbollah model in Lebanon.

This strategy further includes the creation of a corridor linking Iranian territory to the Mediterranean through the Levant.[83] It is suggested by Israeli security analysts that, with the support of proxy groups, Tehran will protect its access to this corridor and potentially its long-term presence

(79) Jubin M. Goodarzi, "The Syrian-Iranian Alliance: Whither the Damascus-Tehran Axis?", *Singapore Middle East Papers* Vol. 6 (2), July 2014, https://meisingapore.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/smep-6-2-goodarzi2.pdf (Accessed 30 September 2017).

(80) Phillip Smyth, "How Iran is Building its Syrian Hezbollah," *Policy Watch,* No. 2580, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 8 March 2016. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-iran-is-building-its-syrian-hezbollah (Accessed 2 October 2017).

(81) Afshon Ostovar, "Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2016, http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/30/sectarian-dilemmas-in-iranian-foreign-policy-when-strategy-and-identity-politics-collide-pub-66288 (Accessed 25 September 2018).

(82) Judah Ari Gross, "Israel at UN: Iran has more than 80,000 fighters in Syria," *Times of Israel*, 26 April 2018, https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-at-un-iran-has-more-than-80000-fighters-in-syria/ (Accessed 27 May 2018).

(83) Ehud Yaari presents this idea in his "Iran's Ambitions in the Levant," *Foreign Affairs*, 1 May 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-05-01/irans-ambitions-levant (Accessed 22 September 2017).

in the country.[84] By doing so, Tehran seeks to project its strength and challenge Israel not just through Hezbollah in Lebanon, but also along Israel's northern border. Israel has consistently stated that it will not permit Iran to establish bases in Syria.[85]

By 2014, Tehran believed its support for Assad was no longer solely about its own vision of strategic depth, but also tied to fighting Islamic extremism, wider regional tensions with Saudi Arabia and Iran's sense of survival.[86] This broadened sense of the crisis was captured by an Iranian official speaking anonymously,

> "Iran's struggle in Syria is different from others: It's an existential war with no choice for us but to win. All the other parties fighting in Syria can afford to win or lose, except Iran. Not winning this war will have dire consequences not only for Iran but also for the Shiites of the world. Therefore, it was the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who took the decision to help Syria. It was both a religious and a political decision."[87]

Khamenei also weighed in on the *zero-sum* nature of the conflict stating, "If the ill-wishers and seditionists, who are the puppets of the US and Zionism, had not been confronted [in Syria], we would have to stood against them in Tehran, Fars, Khorasan and Isfahan."[88]

(84) Ibid.

(85) "Israel is determined to stop Iran from establishing bases in Syria," *The Economist*, 12 April 2018, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/04/12/israel-is-determined-to-stop-iran-from-establishing-bases-in-syria (Accessed 27 May 2018).

(86) Yaari, 2017.

(87) Ali Hashem, "In Syria, Iran sees Necessary War," *Al Monitor.com,* 16 March 2017, https://geopolitics.co/2017/03/19/in-syria-iran-sees-necessary-war/ (Accessed September 30, 2017)

(88) "Khamenei: If not in Syria, Iran Had to Fight Enemy on Its Soil," *AlSharq al Awasat*, January 2017, https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/adel-al-salmi/news-middle-east/khamenei-not-syria-iran-fight-enemy-soil (Accessed 20 September 2017).

To strengthen Iran's commitment, Syria has received a package of $5.4 billion in government loans, economic investment and military support and training.[89] The estimated Syrian post-war reconstruction costs are around $250 billion and Iran is well positioned to obtain a share of this. In this context, Iran was awarded a mobile phone contract in early 2017.[90] Damascus also committed to give Iran 5,000 hectares of land for farming, and 1,000 hectares for setting up oil and gas terminals, according to Iran's state news agency IRNA.[91] A deal was also signed that will provide land for animal husbandry.[92] Ultimately, Iran's investments are designed to protect Assad's power and by virtue of that guarantee Iran's long-term strategic place in Syria. Together with Russia, who intervened in 2015 to assist Assad, Tehran has fully entrenched itself in the conflict.[93]

Iran has also extended similar services to Hezbollah with financial, military, logistical and tactical support, mainly using Syria as a conduit.[94] Their shared goals led to their joint intervention in the conflict.[95] In 2016,

(89) Salam al Saadi, "Iran's Stakes in Syria's Economy," *Sada Journal,* Carnegie Endowment, 2 June 2015. http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/60280 (Accessed 15 October 2017).

(90) Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards reaps economic rewards in Syria," *Reuters*, 17 January 2017. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran/irans-revolutionary-guards-reaps-economic-rewards-in-syria-idUSKBN1531TO (Accessed 12 October 2017).

(91) "Iranian private sector on top of Syrian reconstruction," *Tabnak,* 12 December 2015, http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/761606/%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%AA (Accessed 13 October 2017).

(92) Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, "Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict," Occasional Paper, London, RUSI, August 2016, p. 6. https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201608_op_understanding_irans_role_in_the_syrian_conflict_0.pdf (Accessed 21 September 2017).

(93) Charles Lister, "Russia's intervention in Syria: Protracting an already endless conflict," Oped, *Brookings Institution,* October 21, 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/russias-intervention-in-syria-protracting-an-already-endless-conflict/ (Accessed 23 October 2017).

(94) Nicholas Blanford, "Iran & Region IV: Lebanon's Hezbollah," *The Iran Primer,* 28 January 2015, http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2015/jan/28/iran-region-iv-lebanons-hezbollah (Accessed 5 October 2017).

(95) Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, Adelphi Papers, No 2013/438, London, IISS, 2013.

Hezbollah publically confirmed the extent of Iran's support, stating that the group receives "budget, salaries, funds, food, drink, weapons all from Iran."[96] Beyond this, Iran supports Hezbollah through an intangible amount of logistical and training provisions. Tehran also welcomed the formation of a new Lebanese government in 2016 that included an alliance of Hezbollah and allies. Together, Tehran and Hezbollah's support for Bashar al Assad's government in Syria have further cemented their ties and commitment to the axis of resistance. While the outcome of the war remains far from certain, it is clear that Iran has further embedded its influence in the Levant.

Conclusion

The consequences of Iranian involvement in Syria have not come without risks. The emergence of Sunni extremist groups such as ISIS as well as the support provided by the U.S., Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries for the Syrian opposition groups exacerbated regional tensions and unleashed dangerous sectarian divisions across the Middle East. Tensions between Tehran and Riyadh have also increased proportionately, with Saudi Arabia calling for a unified front to confront Iran's expansion and support for extremism.[97] The Trump Administration, too, has been working in concert with its allies in Israel to contain the breadth and depth of Iran's reach. Israel has quietly but consistently been striking Iranian targets in Syria to ultimately prevent Tehran from further institutionalising its military capability there.[98] Part of the Trump

(96) Analysts estimate these funding amounts to about $200 million annually.

(97) John Irish, "Saudi Arabia, Israel present defacto united front against Iran," *Reuters,* 19 February 2017. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iran-idUSKBN15Y09R (Accessed 25 September 2017).

(98) "Israel strikes Iranian targets in Syria in response to rocket fire," *BBC News*, May 10, 2018 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-44063022 (Accessed 27 May 2018).

Administration's strategy is to exert maximum pressure against Tehran by encircling Hezbollah, marginalizing Assad and severing Iran's influence to the region.[99] Washington's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal has further exacerbated these dynamics and heightened fears that regional tensions will escalate.

Against this backdrop, the trilateral talks, known as the Astana process, between Russia, Turkey and Iran are aimed at de-escalation. Practically, however, this Russian-led initiative has given Iran a stake in the conflict resolution process and the ability to protect its gains and wider objectives in the Levant while also solidifying its relationship with the "axis of resistance." These strategic goals should be questioned though in the context of U.S., Israeli, and Saudi Arabian unity against Iran. The damage to Tehran's regional reputation has come at a significant cost. In the face of this unity and forthcoming plans to pressure Iran, the financial burden of Tehran's support for Assad and Hezbollah could also waver.

Nevertheless, Iran's position in the Levant appears deep-rooted, strategic and guided by a long-term, diversified foreign policy perspective and approach. Tehran is cognizant of its historical bonds to the Levant and has placed importance on the durability of its alliances and relationships that have been nurtured over decades. Moreover, Tehran, as an opportunistic regional actor, has taken advantage of conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War to pursue its strategic objectives of obtaining strategic depth, fighting against terrorism and maintaining its resistance axis in the Levant. While its priorities and purpose has shifted in reaction to regional events and facts on the ground, Tehran has remained steadfast in its approach, seeing its Levantine ties as existential and essential for the strength and durability of the Islamic Republic. Compared to its neighbours, Tehran

(99) Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy/ 13 October 2017, (Accessed 27 September 2017).

has mastered the long game in the Levant. Unravelling the ties that bind it to the region will be harder than expected.

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Russian Policy in the Levant

Irina Zvyagelskaya

Introduction

Russia's interests in the Levant cannot be separated from its global interests and calculations. The increasingly diverged interpretation of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the role of military interference as advanced by the main actors in the international arena, has posed a particular challenge to Russia, as well as to other nations.

The current processes underway in the Middle East and Levant result from the impact of a number of global trends, which include the crisis of the ruling elite and states, aggravation of socio-economic problems, increasing exclusivity within the ruling strata and lack of social mobility, and crisis of global secular ideologies. The situation in the region has had a direct bearing on the global balance of forces. The main divisive features of the modern international landscape are the uncertainty associated with the high level of conflict risk, involvement of external forces in conflicts with varying interests, and the growing activities of the local and transnational terrorist organizations. Historically, the Middle East has been exposed to the influences and/or control of external forces, a history which has left the region with a fairly loose structure of interstate relations devoid of powerful and trusted leaders,[1] forcing the countries of the region to continually search for legitimization.

(1) Ian Lustik, "The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political 'Backwardness' in Historical Perspective", *International Organization*, Vol. 51 (4), Autumn 1997, pp. 661-662.

The region is called the Near East in Russia and, because of its geographic proximity, its various military threats, conflicts, and terrorism are sources of particular concern in Russia. The Levant, as a part of the wider Middle East region and comprised of modern Asiatic Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and possibly Egypt (but not necessarily Cyprus),[2] can be seen through the same lenses.

Different roles have been assumed by the jihadist extremist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS and al-Qaida, under the conditions of civil war with the involvement of external countries in Syria, continuing tribal clashes in Libya and protracted internal confrontations in Iraq. Their activities have had an impact on Russia, as they are also a source of radicalization for some Russian citizens (around 14% of Russian citizens are Muslims). They also have affected the situation in Central Asia, where radicalization is on the rise.[3] Several thousand Russian and Central Asian residents left their homes to join jihadists in Syria, Iraq, and more recently, in Afghanistan.[4] A containment of these threats is obviously a priority for Moscow.

This said, Russian interests in the region cannot be narrowed to the regional agenda. Russia's global interests can better explain the country's new activist behavior in the region.. The Middle East has become a testing ground for Moscow for a more prominent role in the international arena, presenting itself as a powerful global player, and an indispensable partner in the fight against international terrorism.

(2) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archeology in the Near East*, current version 2011, http://www.oxfordreference.com/search?q=levant&searchBtn=Search&isQuickSearch=true (Accessed 28 January 2018).

(3) Erlan Karin, *Soldaty Khalifata: mify i real'nost'* (Soldiers of the Caliphate: Myths and Realities), Almaty, Vlast', 2014, p. 173.

(4) Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, New York, The Soufan Center, October 2017, p. 11.

This article examines the policies of the Russian Federation in the Levant by examining the country's approach to two of the region's most intractable sources of instability: The Syrian Civil War and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In the former, Russia has been an active player capable of making unexpected decisions. In the latter, Russia is a traditional participant in the international efforts to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict, exhibiting a more predictable behavior. These two conflicts are the focal points of Russian policies in the region. The conflicts provide opportunities for the author to present Russian policy towards the different countries of Levant, to accentuate its approaches, while at the same time allowing to avoid the description of the routines of bilateral relations.

Shaping Russian Approaches

Reviewing the policies of the Russian Federation in the Arab world in general, one cannot lose sight of the Soviet period, which, while substantially different from today, is still responsible for the formation of Russia's image in the region today.

The Soviet Union came to the Middle East in the second half of the 1950s and gained a strong foothold there during the following two decades as Arab national liberation movements were on the rise. At the time, Moscow was ready to sacrifice some of its most rigid ideological perceptions in favor of pragmatic considerations. Thus, Russian scholar and political figure Yevgeny Primakov explained the reasons underlying the decision of the Soviet leadership to ignore the blatant ideological and political flaws of the new regimes in the Arab states:

> Life compelled us to ascribe the leading role in the national liberation movements to the petty-bourgeois revolutionaries, who denied the proletarian dictatorship, the class struggle, even the division of society into classes…The term 'revolutionary democrats' was coined to refer to those who had nothing to do with democracy, and in some cases were regenerating into Nazi style rulers… Over the period, when the Cold War was raging, the military and political dimension of the Soviet policies in the Middle East assumed primary importance. A decisive factor in the USSR approach to dealing with this or that Arab state was its foreign policy outlook, its attitude towards military alliances, especially the Baghdad Pact.[5]

For Russia, unlike for the Soviet Union, the ideological component has not had much relevance in the context of its Middle East policies.The differences between Soviet and Russian policies in the Middle East has not meant, however, a total lack of continuity and consistency. Developing relationships with Arab partners continued even after the Soviet Union's collapse, yet Russian policies became more diversified as the country began developing a relationship with Israel, establishing closer ties with Turkey and Iran, improving contacts with Saudi Arabia, and maintaining liaison relationships with a number of non-governmental actors.[6]

Russian leaders have thought to consolidate the nation's presence in the Levant, thus creating a more favorable environment for the country to act independently elsewhere in international arena. According to the authors of a monograph, entitled "Russia's Foreign Policy", Russia has been

(5) Yevgeny M. Primakov, "Blizhnevostochnaya politika Rossii: istoricheskie etapy" (The Middle East Policy of Russia: Historic Milestones), in Vitaly V. Naumkin, Veniamin V. Popov, Vasili A. Kuznetsov (eds.), *Blizhnii Vostok, arabskoe probuzhdenie i Rossiya: chto dal'she? (The Middle East, The Arab Awakening and Russia: What Comes Next?),* Moscow, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, 2012, pp. 24-25.

(6) Veniamin Popov, "My uspeshno vosstanavlivaem nashi pozitsii" (We've been Restoring Our Positions Successfully*), Rossiya v global'noi politike,* 22 September 2014, http://globalaffairs.ru/diplomacy/Veniamin-Popov-my-uspeshno-vosstanavlivaem-svoi-pozitcii--16984 (Accessed 14 February 2018).

confronted by new challenges thanks to a more structurally complicated and competitive world order:

> Russia was building up its policies under conditions of an increasingly complicated environment. Yet, as the manifestation of polycentric tendencies became more conspicuous, which was reflected in the more dynamic activities of other traditional and growing global players, as well as in the change of behavioral pattern of non-governmental actors, it was more difficult and more challenging to maintain the status of a great power, to facilitate and protect the national interests in all spheres, including economy and security.[7]

Within this context, a successful and confident regional policy was an indication of Russia's place among the most powerful of international players. Nevertheless, it was believed in Russia, long before the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, that the West harbored a disparaging attitude towards the country and that it's opinions on the key security issues were simply ignored. This belief was bellied by a NATO expansion that would reach as far as the Russian frontier if the planned inclusion of Georgia and the Ukraine to the alliance ever materialized.[8] Moreover, Russia itself was increasingly regarded as a simply a regional power. Barack Obama said this openly in a response to a reporter's question at The Hague in March 2014: "Russia is a regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbors; not out of strength but out of weakness".[9] Thus,

(7) Tatyana A. Shakleina, Alexander N. Panov, Alexander. S. Bulatov et all., *Vneshnyaya politika Rossii, 1991–2016* (Russia's Foreign Policies, 1991–2016), Moscow, MGIMO University, 2017, p. 20.

(8) "Bush backs Ukraine and Georgia for NATO membership", *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/01/nato.georgia (Accessed 25 January 2018).

(9) "Obama dismisses Russia as 'regional power' acting out of weakness", *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-dismisses-russia-as-regional-power-acting-out-of-weakness/2014/03/25/1e5a678e-b439-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html?utm_term=.eaae11627f7d (Accessed 14 February 2018).

Vladimir Putin's address delivered at the Valdai Forum in October 2017 was in no way an exaggeration, and reflected the basic Russian perception of the causes of a serious controversy between the Russian Federation and the West: "The biggest mistake that we made while dealing with the West was that we trusted you too much, and you made a mistake when you took that trust for a weakness and misused our trust."[10]

As Russia did not possess as much power or as strong of a resource base as the former USSR, it sought to present its foreign policy as a symbol of success. The Middle East offered unique opportunity for this. Middle Eastern states, who felt nostalgia for a time when a nation played the part of a counterweight to the US, were also interested in Russia's return not only as an ally, but as an honest broker. However, the Middle East was not a foreign policy priority for the Russian Federation, so the stakes for it were not as high as, for instance, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).[11]

Apart from maintaining security and emphasizing its geopolitical status, Russia was also guided in its activist policies in the Levant by the desire to display itself as an indispensable partner in the struggle against the common enemy of international terrorism. By doing so, Russia hoped to achieve a certain degree of cooperation with the West and set up the conditions for an improvement of its relationship, which had been severely impaired since the Ukrainian crisis.

(10) "Putin nazval glavnuyu oshibku RF v otnosheniyakh s Zapadom" (Putin named the main mistake of the RF in its relations with the West), https://news.rambler.ru/politics/38202038-putin-nazval-glavnuyu-oshibku-rf-v-otnosheniyah-s-zapadom/?utm_ referrer =https%3A%2F%2Fzen.yandex.com (Accessed 28 February 2018).

(11) *Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi federatsii* (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation), 30 November 2016, part IV, pp. 22-34, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248 (Accessed 12 February 2018).

Syria: Military and Political Aspects

Looking retrospectively at Russia's policies in Syria, which have impacted the overall situation in the region, it can be concluded that they were influenced by the failures of the Libyan intervention. The UN Security Council's resolution establishing a no-fly zone in Libya on 17 March 201112 and the severe NATO bombardment of the country were met with much criticism in Russia.13 Even the then-Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev did not see eye to eye on the issue. According to the BBC, the rare rebuke came after Putin pronounced the resolution resembled a "medieval calls for crusades" while Medvedev said such comments could "lead to a clash of civilizations".14

The Libyan precedent left an impression in Russia that it was cheated by the West with the help of obscure wording in the UN resolution.[15] In the opinion of a powerful segment of the Russian elite, not only was the intervention costly, but a major threat was also perceived if a precedent was set that allowed Western interventionism to become a universal instrument for forced regime change.[16] Thus, the Libyan experience largely determined the attitude of Russian leaders and society towards the civil war in Syria, where the protest movements acquired a increased momentum in the second half of March 2011 and escalated into armed clashes. Mistakes committed by the Syrian security services and army, motivated by a commitment to retain power at whatever cost, the erosion of ideological guidelines of the Arab Socialist Renaissance Party (the *Ba'ath Party*), the loss of its managerial functions, and finally, the support given to opposition forces by some regional and global powers gave rise to a fierce and uncompromising struggle.

The Russian Aerospace Force was deployed to Syria in September 2015 with the following task in mind: Russia sought to retain the Syrian state system in place, where the only functioning institutions were the President and the Army. Meanwhile, the Syrian Army was on its last legs and would soon have fully exhausted itself absent outside support. If the opposition, partly composed of radical groups, could manage to topple the regime, then there would be a destructive effect on the entire region. Such an outcome would likely lead to other developments that would undermine stability in the region: there was a high degree of probability that the Sunni-Shiite controversy would deepen further, anti-Christian sentiments would grow stronger, inter-ethnic tensions would be exacerbated and violence would spill over into neighboring states such as Lebanon and Jordan.

Also, Russia planned to strike a severe blow against international terrorist groups and put up barriers to prevent radical Islamists from spilling into other states in the Middle East and elsewhere. Developments on the ground showed later on that these concerns were not entirely groundless.[17] The ability of radical groups to easily cross borders jeopardizes Russia's security, especially considering the fact that that the border between the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan is about 7.5 thousand kilometers in length and is not reinforced properly as one would expect from a classic interstate frontier.[18] As a result, only reinforced

(12) *Resolution 1973 (2011),* http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/ N11/268/39/PDF/N1126839.pdf (Accessed 10 November 2017).

(13)Michail Margelov, "Arabskii mir i predely avtoritarnoi modernizatsii" (The Arab World and the Limits of Authoritarian Modernization), *Rossiya v global'noi politike* , No 2, 2011, http://www.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/83 (Accessed 3 March 2018).

(14) "Medvedev rejects Putin 'crusade' remark over Libya", http://www.bbc.co.uk (Accessed 22 March 2017).

(15) Margelov, "Arabskii mir i predely avtoritarnoi modernizatsii".

(16) Julie Wilhelmsen and Kristin Haugevik, "Strategic partners against terrorism 2.0? Russia's initial positions on Syria", *Policy Brief*, NUPI, No 37, 2016, p. 1.

(17) On the ISIS expansion see, *ISIS in Libya: a Major Regional and International Threat,* Ramat Ha-Sharon, The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, January 2016.

(18) Http://www.zakon.kz/159640-rossijjsko-kazakhstanskuju-granicu.html (Accessed 9 March 2018).

border that separates Russia from Afghanistan (a country that has been a hotbed of radical Islamism) is the former border of the USSR now controlled by the three Central Asian states.

In contrast to the Taliban, whose violence was locally focused and meant to control Afghan politics, the possible move of ISIS into Afghanistan could have altered the existing traditional balance of forces in that country. As was stated by Igor Sergun, the Chief of General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces, ISIS emissaries have been engaged in recruiting militants from the Eastern and Northern provinces of Afghanistan, including from territory located along the border with Turkmenistan.[19] Regular reports on the extension of ISIS's international structure and the oaths of allegiance taken by the leaders of other extremist groups, as well as the creation of Wilayat Khorasan as an ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan in January 2015 can be explained by ISIS's desire to attract international attention,[20] and that the ISIS is a franchise scheme designed to swallow up isolated groups, tribes, organizations and to declare them as an inalienable part of its structure. At present all countries of Central Asia have been named by the jihadists as an area of responsibility of the IS branch - "The Islamic State of Khorasan".[21]
As ISIS continued to gain momentum, seizing vast swathes of territory

(19) For further details http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2015/10/15/1451559.html (Accessed 8 March 2018).

(20) By way of example, according to the evaluation of the Iranian side, currently, the Afghan security officers also warn that in Northern Afghanistan on the border with Central Asia, the presence of groups associated with the ISIS is becoming more conspicuous. It is maintained that the extremists based in the Afghan province of Badakhshan have also taken an oath of allegiance to the "Islamic State" and replaced their former flags with the black ISIS banner. At present, over 5,000 ISIS militants are located on the Tajik border and about 2,000 on the Turkmen border. The Afghan provinces of Kunduz, Baghlan, Sari Pul, Faryab, and Jawzjan have accommodated terrorists who come from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, North Caucasus, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Translated from *Iranian Diplomacy,* 23 March 2015, http://inosmi.ru/irdiplomacy_ir/ (Accessed 12 September 2017).

(21) Andrei A Kazantsev and Leonid U. Gusev, *Ugroza religioznogo ekstremizma na postsovetskoi territorii (A Threat of Religious Extremism for the Post-Soviet Territory),* Moscow, Center for Integration Studies-MGIMO, 2017, p. 51

in Syria, an international coalition headed by the US began operations against the group in September 2014. However, this did not stop the bloodshed. By late 2015, the number of victims in the conflict had exceeded 270,000 people, according to UN data.[22] Under such circumstances, Russia began its military operation in Syria in September 2015.[23] Supported by the Russian Aerospace Forces, the Syrian government forces and its allies managed to reverse the opposition's momentum, turning to the offensive in key localities. By December 2016, with the Russian assistance, over 600 populated areas had been recaptured, including the ancient city of Aleppo.[24] The dilemma of "either Assad or ISIS" was no longer relevant. Within such context, the political settlement in Syria has increasingly become a matter of priority for the Russian Federation.

Efforts to Stabilize the Situation in Syria

An element of critical importance for Russia's efforts in Syria was the building up of a regional format for Astana with a view to supplement the faltering Geneva process. Russia, notwithstanding its fairly serious disagreement with Turkey and its existing divergence of interests with Iran concerning both the situation in Syria and the two countries' wider perspective on the Middle East, successfully contrived to adopt a rational working structure with these states, bringing stability to the situation. Turkey's and Iran's connections with local forces fighting one another

(22) Http://tass.ru/info/4558821. (Accessed 22 October 2017).

(23) While the Russian Aerospace Forces were largely withdrawn from Syria in 2017, a limited contingent retains its presence in Latakia in the bases of Hmeymim and Tartus. One can add to it that the Russian police force was mostly staffed by the servicemen from the North Caucasus. The marines and paratroopers have been protecting the outer circle of defense facilities, and the police were inside the perimeter. See https://topwar.ru/132395-v-edinoy-maskirovochnoy-rascvetke.html (Accessed 28 January 2017).

(24) Ibid.

gave these states powerful leverage and allowed them to play the role of guarantors in the event that a ceasefire was reached to stabilize parts of Syria.[25]

A regional framework created for the Astana process essentially focused on the major changes underway in the Middle East, such as the dramatically increased role of regional powers (i.e. Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel) with separate interests and agendas, as well as a readiness to use not only political but also military instruments to implement them.[26] The rationale of negotiations in Astana would be the following: making it possible to reduce the intensity and extent of the fighting, relieve the humanitarian distress to the extent possible, enable refugees to start returning to Syria, and to open up a way for a peace process. With the assistance of Iran and Turkey, as well as UN Decisions, guidelines for enacting ceasefires were transformed and would allow for the creation of four de-escalation zones.

However, the establishment of de-escalation zones sparked apprehension among regional players, despite the fact that it would provide an opportunity to some of them to contribute to the process. According to a Russian expert Vitaly Naumkin, "Together with the United States and Jordan, we agreed to establish a de-escalation zone in the south-west of Syria, and it works even better than others, for example, in East Ghouta or Idlib".[27] The most serious concern was voiced by Israel, who disliked Iran's involvement and potential to reinforce its positions near the Israeli

(25) "Russia, Iran and Turkey to act as ceasefire regime guarantors", 24 January 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/russia-iran-and-turkey-to-act-as-ceasefire-regime-guarantors-un_a2992403 (Accessed 11 February 2018).

(26) Isabel Kershner, Anne Barnard and Eric Schmitt, "Israel Strikes Iran in Syria and Loses a Jet", *The New York Times,* 10 February 2018.

(27) "Russia's 'high-precision policy' in the Middle East makes it increasingly important player in regional processes", http://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/russia-s-high-precision-policy-in-the-middle-east/?sphrase_id=256164 (Accessed 14 February 2018).

held Golan Heights and the possibility that Hizballah would be allowed to advance into the area.[28] More generally, Israel vigorously opposes the creation of an Iran-controlled land corridor stretching from Iraq to Lebanon via Syria.[29] According to Israeli analysts;

> To avoid the negative developments and unilateral shaping of tomorrow's Syria by the Russian-Iranian axis, Israel should act on two parallel levels: one, display resolve toward Russia and continue to project strength and power to undermine Russian efforts in the region, in order to retain its bargaining chips; and two, encourage the United States, Jordan, and the Gulf states to be more involved in the strategic discussions on resolving the Syrian crisis.[30]

Fortunately, such radical advice does not necessarily translate into Israel's policy, especially as far as the matter of disrupting Russian efforts in the region is concerned. Throughout the post-Soviet period, the Russian Federation has consistently pursued a strategy of promoting the development of relationships with Israel. This relation serves as an example of Russia's desire to maintain a high level of bilateral contacts despite that the countries may have differences and diametrically opposed interests.[31] The Israeli approach to the situation in Syria, its occasional shootings and bombardments of positions held by Hizballah,

(28) Kershner, Barnard and Schmitt, "Israel Strikes Iran".

(29) "Bennett: We Won't Allow Iran to Establish Land Corridor to Syria", http://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-we-wont-allow-iran-to-establish-land-corridor-to-syria (Accessed 1 February 2018).

(30) Ofek Riemer and Garmit Valensi, "The Agreement on De-escalation Zones in Syria: Risks to Israel, with Opportunities for Influence", *INSS Insight,* No 928, 15 May 2017, http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/No.-929.pdf (Accessed 24 May 2018).

(31) Irina Zvyagelskaya, "Russia and Israel: Trust despite Disagreements", http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-and-israel-trust-disagreements/ (Accessed 5 February 2018).

Iran and the Syrian Army,[32] and its demands to constrain Iran, do not compute well with Russian policies in the region. Nevertheless, sustained political dialogue and the ongoing interaction between the Russian and Israeli militaries on de-confliction zones have prevented possible frictions between them over Syria.

Another important element of the Syrian puzzle is the role played by Hizballah, which is not considered to be an ally of Russia, but a tactical and situational counterpart.[33] Notwithstanding, one can suspect that after enhancing its political influence in Lebanon over the years, following the election of President Michel Aoun, Hizballah would not resist the temptation of viewing its relations with Russia in Syria as a complementary to the group's power in Lebanon. Yet, such wishful thinking is not wholly justifiable, as the US-based policy analyst Mark Katz argued:

> ... while many in the West see Russia, Iran, and Hizballah as firmly allied in the Levant, they really are not. The Iranian regime and Hizballah are pursuing a sectarian Shi'a agenda that is not only anti-Israel, but anti-Sunni... What Putin appears to seek instead is to become the crucial party for each in keeping threats from its regional rivals in check. Each, then, would have an incentive to continue good relations with (or even make concessions to) Moscow for fear that the Kremlin will increase support for its rivals.[34]

It seems quite likely that Russia's dealing with various players in the Middle East will effectively make some of them more flexible and

(32)Http://newsru.co.il/mideast/19oct2017/syria_009.html?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fzen.yandex.com

(33) Mark Katz, "Putin's power play Russia and Lebanon: A Geopolitical Juggling Act", *The American Interest*, 28 November 2016, https://www.the-american-interest. com/2016/10/28/Russia-and-Lebanon-a-geopolitical-juggling-act/ (Accessed 10 September 2017).

(34) Ibid.

cooperative. As a final analysis, the source of the Russian Federation's power in the region and its ability to be on friendly terms with all of the key players (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Egypt, Hizballah, Jordan, the Assad regime in Syria, HAMAS etc.,) is a byproduct of its military and political strategy in Syria. The desire of the leading states in the region (Saudi Arabia, other Gulf Countries, Turkey, Egypt and others) to acquire advanced Russian weapons[35] also augment this power. Similarly, non-state players in Syria have also tried to take advantage of Russia's presence in order to secure additional leverage so that they are not left on the sidelines in the event of a future political settlement.

The Congress of Syrian National Dialogue held in Sochi on 29-30 January 2018 was an important step towards stabilization in Syria. A second track format was less binding than the official negotiations and it allowed different Syrian political forces, ethnic and confessional communities, groups, etc., to send their representatives to the Congress. While not all parties decided to attend, according to the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Michail Bogdanov, the results were;

(35) The UAE and Russia signed a letter of intent on the purchase of Su-35 fighter jets in February 2017. The UAE has already purchased Russian ground weapons such as BMP-3 infantry combat vehicles and Pantsir S1 air-defense systems and entered into military contracts with Russia worth $1.9 billion. The deal includes 5,000 anti-armor missiles in addition to training and logistic support. This year, Moscow started delivery of 50 MiG-29 fighter aircraft to Egypt. Cairo is also to start receiving 46 Ka-50 combat helicopters. It was reported in September 2017 that Algeria is going to buy over 300 Russian-made BMPT-72 Terminator-2 tank support combat vehicles (TSCV) in order to support T-90SA main battle tanks bought from Russia earlier. Now, the Algerian military uses technical vehicles equipped with Kornet ATGM launchers and ZSU Shilka self-propelled, radar guided anti-aircraft weapon systems. In early October 2017, Russia had signed a number of landmark arms contracts with Riyadh. The deal includes the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system as well as Kornet-EM anti-tank missile systems, TOS-1A "Buratino" heavy flame systems, AGS-30 grenade launchers and Kalashnikov AK-103 assault rifles. The already agreed on sales of S-400 air defense system to Saudi Arabia and Turkey are groundbreaking deals. See Andrei Akulov, " Russia's Arms Sales to Middle East Countries Spike to Record-High Levels", https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2017/11/18/russia-arms-sales-middle-east-countries-spike-record-high-levels.html (Accessed 19 November 2018).

> "impressive... Our partners in the Astana process — Iran and Turkey — played an important role in ensuring the success of this event. At the same time, they worked with us to ensure maximum representation of Syrian political forces, civil society, ethnic and religious groups at the Congress, and contributed to the adoption of balanced decisions that could form the basis of the inter-Syrian negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations."[36]

Moreover, the prospect of Syria's economic recovery can be a critical driver for the country's neighbors to solidify their own political and economic standing. In this connection, Lebanon, in all probability, could play a special role. It was not accidental that, after a meeting with the Russian President Vladimir Putin in September 2017, the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri spoke about Beirut's interest in getting life back to normal in Syria: "We have a seaport of Tripoli, a railway connection, airports. After a final political resolution is found for Syria, Lebanon can be a hub for the post-war reconstruction of Syria".[37] Such an approach could facilitate the participation of Russian companies in the reconstruction of Syria and invigorate Russian business endeavors in Lebanon.

The prospective military cooperation agreement with Lebanon is also on the list in Russia. According to Olga Oliker, director of the Russia and Eurasia program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the agreement provides "a broad framework... So it's not a landmark, it's a step. But it's certainly part of Russia's effort to expand its involvement and relationships in the Middle East, and Lebanon's desire to have more

(36) Michail Bogdanov, *Interview*, https://ria.ru/interview/20180210/1514361847.html

(37) Https://russian.rt.com/document/59b952671835610b2d8b4567/amp/429798-livan-vosstanovlenie-sirii (Accessed 13 September 2017).

partners and options."[38]

In short, the Syrian operation eventually allowed Russia to increase its presence in the Middle East overall and in the Levant in particular. However, it has not contributed much to a prospect of improving regional cooperation with the West; the common fight against terrorism does not appear to be a unifying factor any longer. Areas of divergence with the West are still wide. Generally speaking, they include reaction to Assad's role after a future political transition to the role of regional powers and, some armed groups, etc.

Russia and the Palestinian Problem

By 2018, the Palestinian problem had evolved from the failed attemptsto resume the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations to a standoff. Russia has been ready to support political efforts to consolidate Palestinian gains, providing them a possibility to obtain a stronger position at the negotiating table.[39] From Moscow's standpoint, it was necessary to undertake a dynamic policy line with this end in view, considering the prospect of radical changes in the Palestinian community. There exists various distinct sources of tension within the Palestinian polity, with Palestinian leadership being perceived, more often than not, by the younger and impatient generation as politically obsolete and illegitimate.[40]

(38) Michael Peck, "Lebanon: Russia's New Outpost in the Middle East?", *The National Interest,* 18 February 2018, http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/lebanon-russias-new-outpost-the-middle-east-24538, (Accessed 20 February, 2018).

(39) Andrei Fedorchenko, Alexander Krylov and Vladimir Morozov, *Palestinskoe gosudarstvo: pravo na budushchee* (Palestinian State: A Right for the Future), Moscow, MGIMO, 2018, pp. 227-240.

(40) Mohammed Ayoob, "Palestine's Outdated Leadership Threatens Its Future", *The National Interest*, 20 January 2018, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/palestines-outdated-leadership-threatens-its-future-24153 (Accessed 10 February 2018).

Moreover, the efforts to find ways to resolve the conflict have been curtailed by the existing ideological and political rift between Hamas and Fatah.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt have made attempts in the past to reconcile the PNA and Hamas, but these attempts were failed as agreements were either never reached or failed to gain traction.[41] It seems that Hamas's ideology required the group's leaders to take stringent stances that simply did not indicate a willingness to engage in a good faith effort to negotiate a peace with Israel. Russia, for its part, did its best to facilitate the process of national reconciliation. The Russian Federation, irrespective of the criticism leveled by Israel[42] and some Western states, has continued to maintain ties with Hamas. Russian leaders, while condemning the terrorist tactics that have both discredited Hamas and impeded efforts to find a solution to the problem, have still found it necessary to retain contacts with the movement. The logic behind this is simple; Hamas has been an important player, and it cannot be simply ignored by mediators.

The first meeting between Hamas and Fatah representatives was organized in Moscow in 2011 to address the most acute problems in light of the reconciliation agenda and to formulate basic principles.[43] The leaders of the four Palestinian parties and movements, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), arrived in Russia on 21 May following an invitation from the Institute of Oriental Studies, an auspice of the Russian Academy of Sciences.[44] When Hamas and Fatah finally signed an agreement for Gaza on 23 April 2014, establishing a national unity government, the Russian Foreign Ministry was quick to issue a statement saying that it would "continue to render assistance to the Palestinians within the framework of available opportunities seeking to ensure genuine national unity."[45] Though the agreement failed to have a lasting effect, Russia continued to be interested in the issue.

For Palestinians, to overcome a painful territorial (Gaza-West Bank), ideological and political rift would have been a major breakthrough. The resultant unified leadership would be able to pursue a more responsible foreign policy and to take decisions that could not be breached, as they would be supported by a consolidated platform. However, Israeli leaders were not ready at that time for any serious compromise and it was increasingly difficult for Palestinian leaders to content themselves with yet another interim measure, as there was a growing wave of criticism within the Palestinian community, especially among the young population dissatisfied with the lack of any positive prospective. As a result, on 29 November 2012, PNA leaders approached the UN with a request to recognize an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 boundaries.[46] While the process of integrating Palestine into international structures carried on, Russia had no problem with the recognition of the state of Palestine, as the USSR had earlier recognized the independence of the Palestinian state in 1988, after it was proclaimed by the Palestinian National Council (PNC).[47]

(41) Elior Levy, "Fatah and Hamas: Another failed attempt at reconciliation?", https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5023631,00.html (Accessed 18 February 2018).

(42) "Russia-Hamas talks anger Israel", http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4701312.stm (Accessed 11 February 2018).

(43) Https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2011-05-25/Moskva-podderzhala-usiliya-HAMASa-i (Accessed 17 February 2018).

(44) Https://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2011/05/21/n_1849377.shtml (Accessed 18 February 2018).

(45) Http://itar-tass.com/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1142117 (Accessed 14 April 2015).

(46) On 29 November 2012, the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution 67/191, under which Palestine was granted the observer status with the UN, as a state who "is not a UN member, without prejudice to the rights obtained, privilege and role of the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine at the UN as a representative of the Palestinian people". See http://tass.ru/info/1543412 (Accessed 20 April 2017).

(47) Http://tass.ru/info/1543412 (Accessed 10 February 2018).

Meanwhile Hamas failed to solve the burning problems facing Gaza residents and was unable to prevent the citizenry's aggravation as a result of the Israeli blockade. A UN report issued in 2017 addresses the problems with which Gaza Strip residents are confronted. The report cites a lack of employment opportunities, a lack of access to quality healthcare, as well as environmental concerns, adding that, if no measures are undertaken by 2020, the only source of fresh water in Gaza will be completely depleted.[48] At the same time, more radicalized jihadist groups, ideologically akin to Al-Qaida, have moved into Gaza and gained traction among the local Palestinians.

Having sensed a change in the political landscape, Hamas made a shift to appeal more towards Palestinian nationalism. Thus, in a new statement of principles issued in May 2017, Hamas demonstrated pragmatism,[49] rather than the desire to float in the waves of unadulterated Islamist utopia. The revised "principles" apparently reflected the road covered by Hamas as a quasi-government and the desire of its leadership to turn the "terrorist" organization into a legitimate partner for any potential negotiations focusing on the Palestinian problem.

In January 2017, Moscow was again the venue for negotiations between the representatives of Fatah, Hamas, and their affiliate organizations.[50] Then in October 2017, following negotiations in Egypt, Fatah and Hamas reached an agreement on all the issues concerning the establishment of a national unity government.[51] From the Russian perspective, it was a

(48) *UN Information Center in Moscow,* http://www.unic.ru/event/2017-07-11/v-mire/tyazheleishee-sotsialno-ekonomicheskoe-polozhenie-v-gaze-posledstvie-10-letn (Accessed 15 July 2017).

(49) Udi Dekel, "Hamas's New Statement of Principles: A Political Opportunity for Israel?", *INSS Insight*, No 928, 14 May 2017, pp. 1-3.

(50) Konstantin Volkov, "Fatkh i Khamas v pyatyi raz dogovorilis' pomirit'sya" (FATAH and HAMAS have agreed to patch things up for the fifth time", *Rossiyskaya Gazeta,* 12 October 2017.

(51) Https://ria.ru/world/20171019/1507181668.html (Accessed 5 November 2017).

significant achievement, although it is too early to speculate about the survivability and sustainability of the settlement.

In 2017-2018, the Palestinian problem (previously shadowed by other conflicts in the region) again found itself at the center of international attention. This time the cause was the US decision to officially move its Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem on 14 May 2018. With this decision, the Israeli right saw a golden opportunity for themselves. On 31 December 2017, soon after the US President's statement on the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the Central Committee of Likud voted in support of the annexation of the West Bank and Jerusalem. According to Likud activist Nathan Engelsman, "this is a historic event that we have been waiting for a long time. If the US President believes Jerusalem is ours, there is no reason for the right party and coalition to think otherwise."[52], The deputies approved the Basic Law on the United Jerusalem at the plenary session of the Knesset on 2 January 2018, which stipulates that the transfer of any part of Jerusalem to foreign jurisdiction, even within the framework of a political settlement, will require a majority of 80 votes.[53] Hamas mobilized thousands of Palestinians on the border with Israel. They were met with fire. Israeli forces killed dozens of Palestinians in bloody clashes at the Gaza border.[54] The continuous exchange of fire has signaled a growing escalation between the Israeli army and Hamas.

Developments in the Middle East have made the issue of Palestinian-Israeli peace more urgent, providing an opportunity for Russia to become a more prominent power broker in the region. According to the Lebanese newspaper *Ad-Diyar*, Russia can replace the United States as a mediator

(52) Http://detaly.co.il/netaniyagu-3/ (Accessed 10 March 2018).

(53) Http://newsru.co.il/israel/02jan2018/jer_605.html (Accessed 6 March 2018).

(54) https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/14/middleeast/gaza-protests-intl/index.html/edition.cnn.com (Accessed 27 May 2018

in the settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Russia has traditionally supported the interests of Palestine, and Putin also has a close relationship with Netanyahu.[55] Obviously, Russia would not be able to, or interested in, replacing either the US or any other power, which has been engaged in the process for many years. From the Russian perspective, the Middle East settlement can only be a result of coordinated efforts.

Conclusion

By way of summarizing this review, several conclusions can be drawn. Russia's policies in the Levant are a reflection of its new global role. It can be understood in the context of Moscow's striving for a new world order that is less asymmetrical. Russia believes that in order for it to resume a constructive dialogue with the West it needs to demonstrate its goodwill while proving its ability to defend its legal interests and provide for its security.

On the whole, the Syrian case has demonstrated Russia's readiness to use a wide range of means to advance its tactical and strategic objectives. Russia's decision to deploy its Aerospace Forces to Syria in 2015 testified to Moscow's commitment to defending its interests in the region and its readiness to prevent the terrorist organizations such as ISIS, al-Nusra and al-Qaida, as well as resisting the destruction of the Syrian state and the unpredictable consequence that would follow.

The proactive policy pursued by Russia led to the strengthening of its position in the Middle East and to the forging of new partnerships there. According to Russian analyst Nikolay Kozhanov,

(55)Https://rueconomics.ru/306664-smi-livana-kontakty-putina-s-netanyakhu-i-abbasom-otkryvayut-novye-vozmozhnosti-dlya-izrailya-i-palestiny (Accessed 3 March 2018).

> It is also important for the West to keep in mind that, currently, Russia is confident in the success of its Middle Eastern strategy based on the principle of balancing between the different regional players. Success in Syria, rapprochement with Iran, the strengthening of ties with Egypt, and the development of dialogue with Israel and the GCC further cement its self assurance.[56]

The military component of Russian policy sometimes causes some regional and global actors to suspect Russia of seeking to supplant other world powers in the Middle East. However, this opinion is misguided. It has become increasingly obvious in Moscow that stabilization and conflict resolution in the Middle East cannot be achieved by any country acting alone.[57] It is also true that Russia's policy in the Levant has not been marked only by success. The working relationships established by Russia with a number of regional powers, especially Turkey and Iran, are not cloudless. The interests of the countries three are not identical and it seems that more differences will rise to the surface in the foreseeable future. The situation on the ground has not been stabilized and a lot of effort is required to make it less explosive. With the military defeat of ISIS, relations between Russia and the Western coalition might become more complicated and their respective strategies in Syria rendered even less compatible.

With regard to the Palestinian problem, the approach adopted by the Russian Federation, both in form and in content, has been that of continuity. If we compare the impact of the Palestinian conflict with the

(56) Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russian Policy Across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods,* London, Chatham House, February 2018, p. 29.

(57) Vasily Kuznetsov, Vitaly Naumkin, and Irina Zvyagelskaya, *Russia in the Middle East: Playing on All Fields.* Material for Discussion at the Middle east Conference of the Valdai Discussion Club, Moscow, 19-20 February 2018, p. 8.

impact of the Arab Spring on Russian security, the instability and strategic uncertainty that have been produced as a result of the developments in the Arab world since 2011 tend to pose a much more serious challenge than the unresolved Palestinian problem. However, this did not mean that the conflict was given a lower priority by Russian policy-makers. Russia's participation in the international structures dealing with conflict resolution has always been seen as a positive factor for the nation, as it opens up crucial channels of cooperation with various countries, which are kept available so they can be leveraged again to solve future international disputes.

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US Policies Adrift in a Levant in Turmoil

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Introduction

The term Levant, which derives from the Italian *Levante*, meaning the rising of the sun in the east, is used to refer to the eastern part of the Mediterranean that includes Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan and Syria. After Britain's colonial empire shattered, the United States filled the void, especially following the end of the Second World War, promising to use its leadership to forestall conflicts and wars in an unsettled and troubled geographical space. From then on, the US intervened indirectly and directly in the politics of the region. During the Cold War, Washington tried to broker regional reconciliation between Israel and its Arab neighbors and tried to end domestic tensions in the countries of the Levant through its mediation efforts. In the post-Cold War period, the region failed to find peace and stability despite the initial springing of hope that arose as a result of the Oslo agreements. The prevalence of instability in the region can be explained by the presence of unresolved regional conflicts, the pervasiveness of sectarian and ethnic animosities, and the resilience of authoritarian regimes. Both the absence of a coherent American policy towards the region and America's botched military intervention in Iraq contributed handsomely to the instability and the pervasive violence that has engulfed the region and its millions of inhabitants.

Lawrence Freedman concludes his magisterial work, *A Choice of Enemies*, by suggesting that, "the events of the last decade have taken their toll, and the United States does not enjoy the prestige and influence in the Middle East that it did as recently as the early 1990s…For Americans, the challenge is to revive their diplomatic skills, learning how to work with the local political grain without losing a sense of purpose and principle, pushing parties to cooperation, supporting social and economic along with political reform, and encouraging a positive engagement with the rest of the world."[1] It is hard to conclude from the existing conditions of the region that the US has successfully risen to the challenge.

This paper argues that the vicissitudes of the region and of American politics made Washington's policy towards the Levant look biased, at times incompetent and most importantly inconsistent. Some of the abrupt changes in approach to the region as a whole from one administration to another underscore this inconsistency; the one exception being a pro-Israel tilt that almost invariably informs America's choices. The paper will largely focus on the US policies towards the Levant during the last two American administrations. The first part will explore the early American interest in the Levant and suggest that the (almost) unconditional US support to Israel has proved the most enduring pillar of US engagement in the region. The second part will focus on the complex challenge that the Syrian conflict and its regional repercussions have posed to American leadership and argue that it has changed the power dynamics of the region by introducing Russia once again as a global actor that influences the region's politics. The Syrian Civil War *cum* "regional hegemonic struggle" has also enabled Iran to widen its sphere of influence in Syria and beyond, a power which was already expanding thanks to the failures of the US in Iraq. The third section will analyse the post-Islamic State (IS) period in the region and argue that the intensification of competition between the US and its Saudi and Israeli allies on the one hand and Iran on the other has led Washington to seek a new strategy for a Levant in

(1) Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East*, New York, Perseus Group, 2008, p. 511.

turmoil. The paper will conclude that the balancing, containment and if possible the reversal of Iranian dominance in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon by means of an informal alliance with Israel and Saudi Arabia will become the basic pillar of US policy towards the Levant in the post-IS period under the Trump administration.

Levant: Through the Lens of Israel

The Levant became geopolitically significant for the US following the Second World War due to the region's links to the Persian Gulf. These links would make Washington's policy towards the Levant consequential on accessing oil resources. Indeed, the Levant's geographical proximity to the oil producing countries of the Gulf would partly explain the furious debate that occurred within the Truman administration over the issue of supporting the creation of the state of Israel. Most foreign policy and security professionals were against recognizing the soon-to-be declared Jewish state for fear of jeopardizing American interests in the Arab world, particularly with the oil producing countries of the Gulf. Indeed, one of the most historically significant figures at the State Department, George Kennan, feared that support for partition would endanger US interests:

> Palestine occupies a geographic position of great significance to the US. It is important for the control of the eastern end of the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal. It is an outlet for the oil of the Middle East, which in turn is important to US security. Finally, it is the center of a number of major political cross-currents; and events in Palestine cannot help being reflected in a number of directions.[2]

(2) Irene L. Gendzier, *Dying to Forget: Oil, Power, Palestine and the Foundations of U.S. Policy in the Middle East*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015, I-book screen 230.

By the end of the first Arab-Israeli war however, almost the entire foreign policy and security bureaucracy had come to the conclusion that it was important to have Israel by the side of the US. On the basis of the reports written by Philip Jessup, who was the US Special Delegate to the UN at the time, Gendzier concludes, "…it was desirable to ensure Israel's Westward orientation, which meant lessening Washington's pressure on Tel Aviv to comply with UNGA resolutions to avert its reliance on the USSR".[3] This 'deference' to Israel, as Gendzier calls it, would remain a staple of American policy towards the Levant with the exception of a few cases when Israeli actions ran counter to American interests as was the case in the Suez War.

Ultimately no US president managed to move the conflict to its internationally anticipated and widely accepted conclusion. Walt argues that:

> As Nathan Thrall shows clearly in his recent book *The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine*, past progress toward peace required extensive and persistent American pressure on *both sides* -not just one- and such pressure has been consistently lacking after 1992, when United States took on the role of 'Israel's lawyer'. Small wonder that former Israeli foreign minister Shlomo Ben Ami identifies Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush as the only presidents who made 'meaningful breakthroughs on the way to an Arab-Israeli peace', and argues they succeeded because they were 'ready to confront Israel head on and overlook the sensibilities of her friends in America'.[4]

(3) Ibid, I-book screen 778.

(4) Stephen Walt, "What Dennis Ross Gets Wrong About the 'Israel Lobby' ", *Forward,* 6 October 2017,https://forward.com/opinion/384492/what-dennis-ross-gets-wrong-about-the-israel-lobby/ (Accessed 14 February 2018).

Presidents Carter and George H. W. Bush really pushed Israel hard to make concessions as they strongly opposed Israeli settlement policies. [5]

Yet, from the Eisenhower administration through the Obama era, there were always some efforts to push the process forward. Nevertheless, in recent years, Elgindy argues that:

> when it comes to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, no US president has promised more and accomplished less than Obama. He entered office with a strong start; appointing a special envoy for Middle East peace on his second day in office, calling for an end to Israeli settlement construction, and working to bring the parties back to the negotiating table. But it went downhill from there.[6]

There were indeed many instances when Obama's rhetoric and stated goals were not matched by his or his administration's deeds. After an initial burst of enthusiasm, Obama had given up on determinedly pursuing a settlement of the long-standing conflict. In fact, in his second term he did next to nothing to support the efforts of his Secretary of State, John Kerry, in any substantive way. He ultimately even gave up trying. As he addressed a youthful audience during his visit to Israel in 2013, Obama conceded that there was not much he could do to persuade the Israelis to move ahead with the peace process and that they would have to live

(5) Daniel C. Kurtzer, "The U.S. Must Get Tough in Promoting Arab-Israeli Peace Efforts," *Palestine Israel Journal*, Vol. 13 (4), 2007, http://www.pij.org/details.php?id=971 (Accessed 15 March 2018).

(6) Khaled Elgindy, "Obama's Record on Israeli-Palestinian Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, 5 October 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2016-10-05/obamas-record-israeli-palestinian-peace (Accessed 15 December 2017).

with the consequences of their choices.[7] Although as a parting shot in December 2016, the Obama administration decided to abstain on a UNSC vote condemning construction of settlements in occupied territories.[8] President Obama, whose administration raised the level of military aid to Israel to new heights,[9] had no leverage over Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In fact, Netanyahu, always spiteful of Obama, actively tried to undermine him and worked to push the Iran nuclear deal off track.[10] As such, Obama ended his term as the first US president who did not bring about any progress or breakthroughs in the admittedly dormant, if not comatose, peace process that had begun in the early 1970s.

Ever the unpredictable political actor, President Trump, in turn, changed a long-standing American position concerning Jerusalem. When he announced in a short speech delivered at the White House that the US Embassy in Israel would henceforth be in Jerusalem, he justified the move by referring to the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995.[11] Every President since then, including Trump, has exercised the law's waiver to avoid further

(7) Megan Slack, "President Obama Meets Young Israelis and Palestinians on Second Day of his Middle East Trip", 21 March 2013, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2013/03/21/president-obama-meets-young-israelis-and-palestinians-second-day-his-middle-east-tri (Accessed 10 May 2018).

(8) Peter Beaumont, "US Abstention Allows UN to Demand End to Israeli Settlements," *The Guardian*, 23 December 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/23/us-abstention-allows-un-to-demand-end-to-israeli-settlements (Accessed 16 March 2018).

(9) The Obama administration signed a 10-year military assistance package of $38 billion with Israel. Peter Baker and Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "US Finalizes Deal to Give Israel $38 Billion in Military Aid", *The New York Times,* 13 September 2016, *https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/14/world/middleeast/israel-benjamin-netanyahu-military-aid.html* (Accessed 2 March 2018).

(10) Carol Morello and William Booth,"Netanyahu Warns that Iran is Building Terrorist Cells Worldwide", *The Washington Post*, 1 October 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/netanyahu-warns-that-iran-is-building-terrorist-cells-worldwide/2015/10/01/653fbcc2-6850-11e5-8325-a42b5a459b1e_story.html?utm_term=.e32557895b79 (Accessed 1 April 2018).

(11) Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem/ (Accessed 1 March 2018).

complicating negotiations for an elusive comprehensive settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Trump has said that, "today, we finally acknowledge the obvious, that Jerusalem is Israel's capital. This is nothing more, or less, than recognition of reality. It is also the right thing to do. It's something that has to be done."[12]

There was enough speculation in the international media that Trump's announcement on Jerusalem was actually linked to the Middle East peace plan prepared by his son-in-law Jared Kushner, and the young Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman. A charitable or optimistic reading of President Trump's statement on Jerusalem would suggest, based on his invocation of the two-state solution, that he would support it if it were agreed upon by both sides. By the same token, unlike the 1980 Israeli Basic Law, which declared a 'unified' Jerusalem "the eternal capital" of the state of Israel, Trump did not use the term 'unified' when he recognized it as Israel's capital.[13] Then, the question emerges: Does Trump really have a vision for the region, or is he going to follow the narrowly defined geopolitical interest of Saudi Arabia whose legitimacy depends on protecting Islam's holy places, but whose immediate interests could lead it to ignore the plight of the Palestinians? In the wake of the bloody events on the day of the Embassy's opening when over 60 Palestinian protesters from Gaza were killed by the Israeli military, no great protestation was raised by the "custodian of the two holy mosques,". This absence of a strong protest suggests that the Iran threat trumps the Palestinian cause for the current Saudi rulers.

(12) Ibid.

(13) "Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem", 6 December 2017, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem/ (Accessed 17 January 2018).

The Syrian Conflict: The Changing Matrix of Power Relations in the Levant

The crisis in Syria has posed a profound challenge to American leadership in the Levant. Since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011, US policy in Syria has demonstrated a high degree of ambivalence and prevarication. Both the Obama and Trump administrations have sought to restrain US involvement in Syria and have failed in setting out clear objectives that could have allowed the US to play a constructive role in ending the conflict and transitioning the country. A policy of reticence in return has created an opening for Russia to intervene militarily in support of the Assad regime in September 2015.

When Obama came to power in 2009, he sought to restore America's image in the Middle East and the wider Islamic world. His choice of Turkey as the site of his first bilateral visit outside the North American continent, followed by his historic speech on June 4, 2009 in Cairo indicated that he sought to herald a new beginning between the US and Muslims around the world. Thereupon he promised that these relations would be based upon mutual interest and respect.[14] The new President considered Syria "as a key player in Washington's efforts to revive the stalled Middle East peace process."[15] The Obama administration decided to re-engage with Damascus after years of isolation that followed the killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005.[16] Thus, the new administration sent Robert Ford as ambassador to Damascus

(14) "The President's Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning", https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/presidents-speech-cairo-a-new-beginning (Accessed 15 November 2017).

(15) Harriet Alexander, "John Kerry and Bashar al-Assad Dined In Damascus," *The Telegraph*, 3 September 2013, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10283045/John-Kerry-and-Bashar-al-Assad-dined-in-Damascus.html (Accessed 7 February 2018).

(16) Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016, p. 27.

in 2010, the first such appointment in five years.[17] However, as Philips argues, "re-engagement efforts were led by individuals such as Ford and Clinton's adviser Fred Hof, but there was little coordination between the State Department or the White House."[18] Outside the State Department, Syria continued to be seen through the lens of relations with Israel, and re-engagement with the Assad regime did not cultivate a meaningful relationship in the pre-uprising period.

During the early days of the Syrian uprising, President Barack Obama extended the pattern of ambivalent and inadequate engagement that has traditionally characterized US policy towards Syria. He released a statement on August 18, 2011 that, "the future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. …[He] must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside."[19] Even though the Syrian opposition believed that Obama's words were the harbinger of an American involvement to remove Assad, he was far from making such a clear decision. Based on the President's determined strategy of limiting the US's footprint in the Middle East, a strategy clearly driven by the legacy of the Bush administration's ambitious and failed intervention in Iraq, Obama was reluctant to fully engage the US in Syria following the Arab Awakening. Having run on a platform of withdrawing troops both from Afghanistan and Iraq, he was not inclined to intervene militarily in another Middle Eastern country. Yet, upon the insistence of powerful voices in his

(17) Robert F. Worth, "A New Ambassador to Syria, but Little Hope to Change", *The New York Times,* 30 December 2010. https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/31/world/middleeast/31ambassador.html (Accessed 17 March 2018).

(18) Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 27.

(19) Macon Philips, "President Obama: The Future of Syria Must Be Determined By Its People, But President Bashar al-Assad Is Standing In Their Way", 18 August 2011, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad (Accessed 25 October 2017).

cabinet, notably Hillary Clinton, Susan Rice and Samantha Power, he did assist the British and the French in their attack against the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi.[20] Similarly, at the beginning of the Syrian civil war, he asked for the ouster of Bashar al-Assad and drew a red line on the use of chemical weapons,[21] a statement that would later haunt him as the situation deteriorated and the brutality of the civil war reached new heights.

In a lengthy 2016 interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of the Atlantic Magazine that would serve as a *post-mortem* of his administration's foreign policy, President Obama explained his decision not to become massively involved in the Syrian conflict, citing the conditions in post-Gaddafi Libya following his intervention there. Obama's original Syria policy was evidently based on wishful thinking and the flawed assessment that Assad would leave the way Mubarak went in Egypt. He also believed that the danger to the US posed by the Assad regime was not as serious as threats that would require direct military intervention, such as the threat posed by al-Qaeda or a nuclear-armed Iran.[22] Syria was not a major American security concern or an important subject in American national security assessments.

As Assad clung to power, Obama continued to pay lip service to the need for Assad's to step down. Obama also sent mixed messages about the possibility of an American intervention when he drew his famous red line over the use of chemical weapons in the summer of 2012. In one of his interviews, Obama specifically noted that if chemical weapons were

(20) Micah Zenko, "The Big Lie About the Libyan War", *Foreign Policy*, 22 March 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/22/libya-and-the-myth-of-humanitarian-intervention/ (Accessed 11 May 2018).

(21) Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/ (Accessed 3 November 2018).

(22) Ibid.

used, it would be a game-changer in Syria: "That's an issue that doesn't just concern Syria. It concerns our allies in the region, including Israel. It concerns us."[23] However, when the red line was indeed crossed and the regime's use of chemical weapons became obvious in 2013, Obama balked and sought a UN mandate and congressional support, which were non-forthcoming. As Goldberg observes:

> History may record August 30, 2013, as the day Obama prevented the US from entering yet another disastrous Muslim civil war, and the day he removed the threat of a chemical attack on Israel, Turkey, or Jordan. Or it could be remembered as the day he let the Middle East slip from America's grasp, into the hands of Russia, Iran, and ISIS.[24]

Instead of using direct force, the Obama administration, with the help of Russia, succeeded in launching a multinational effort to remove most of Syria's chemical weapons through the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).[25] However, as Lynch states, "Gulf and Turkish frustration over the aborted American air strikes had provoked ever more reckless support for anyone who might be able to hurt Assad, regardless of the radicalism of their jihadist ideology."[26]

(23) Chuck Todd, *The Stranger*, New York, Little Brown, 2014, p. 431.

(24) Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

(25) By June 2014, OPCW announced that the over 1,300 tons of Syria's declared chemical weapons were destroyed. The OPCW was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for performing such an action. Derek Chollet, "The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World", New York, PublicAffairs, 2016, p. 52.

(26) Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2016, p. 388.

Contrary to the expectations of the supporters of a more interventionist policy, Obama consistently promised 'no boots on the ground' in Syria.[27] As Chollet puts it, "the administration's incremental approach to military involvement in Syria was driven by a desire to avoid mistakes."[28] The US military involvement that contributed to state failure in Libya and later to the tragic murder in September 2012 of the American Ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stevens reinforced Obama's reluctance to more deeply engage in Syria.[29] In line with this policy, Obama formulated a strategy of giving critical support to certain local opposition forces in Syria who were identified as 'moderate'. By 2012, the CIA had already provided intelligence and other support including shipments of secondhand light weapons, including automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and ammunition to groups fighting the Assad government through Turkey's southern border.[30]

The cost of Obama's incrementalism has been an increase in the numbers of jihadi veterans of Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen fighting in Syria and the emergence of new jihadist groups including Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. However, it was not until the IS's capture of large swaths of Syrian and Iraqi territory and the declaration of a Caliphate in newly conquered Mosul by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014 that the US administration was truly and seriously concerned. The IS's victory brought a vivid recognition that the spillover effects of the Syrian war could no

(27) Obama said: "I will not put American boots on the ground in Syria, I will not pursue an open-ended action like Iraq or Afghanistan", "Barack Obama's Speech on Syria in Full", *The Telegraph*, 11 September 2013, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/10300943/Barack-Obamas-speech-on-Syria-in-full.html (Accessed 11 May 2018).

(28) Chollet, *The Long Game*, p. 220.

(29) Ibid.

(30) Eric Schmitt, "C.I.A. Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition", *New York Times,* 21 June 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=79461C000C947A46B173C360C9E381E7&gwt=pay (Accessed 16 December 2017).

longer be contained, which accelerated the establishment of the US-led anti-IS coalition. The coalition was formed based on UNSC Resolutions, including UNSCR 2170, which states "terrorism can only be defeated by a sustained and comprehensive approach involving the active participation and collaboration of all States."[31] The US-led coalition, formed by a dozen nations, began airstrikes on IS targets in Iraq on August 9, 2014, and in Syria on September 22.

The number of airstrikes increased significantly in Syria in September 2014 as IS laid siege around and attempted to capture Kobane, a predominantly Kurdish town located on the Turkish border. The events in Kobane created the first major spat between Turkey and the US over American support for the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria. Since the PYD was an extension of the separatist Kurdish movement Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK) that has waged war against Turkey since 1984 and has been designated by the US as a terrorist organization. Turkey demanded that the same label be accorded to the PYD. Due to the long-standing enmity between Turkey and the PKK, notwithstanding a brief interlude of attempted peacemaking, Ankara was more alarmed by the PYD-led Kurdish expansion than by the menace posed by IS in northern Syria. As a result, while allowing Kurdish civilians to cross the border into Turkey, the Turkish government obstructed access to Kobane in an attempt to block supplies from reaching the PYD. Turkey also denied the US request for the use of the İncirlik Air base in southern Turkey.[32] Despite Turkey's discomfort, the US intensified airdrops of weapons and supplies to the armed wing of PYD, the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) to ensure that Kurdish forces kept control of Kobane. Due to international pressure,

(31) "The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS", https://www.state.gov/s/seci/ (1 December 2018).)

(32) Amy Austin Holmes, "Kobane Says about U.S. Overseas Military Bases", *Monkey Cage,* 2 February 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/02/what-the-battle-for-kobane-says-about-u-s-overseas-military-bases/?utm_term=.4c8372704450 (Accessed 11 May 2018).

Turkey eventually allowed Masoud Barzani's Peshmerga forces to move through Turkey into Kobane with the expectation that these forces would help counterbalance YPG influence among Kurds.[33]

Turkey's strategic decision to refrain from intervening in Kobane not only empowered YPG forces in Syria, but also brought a profound shift in American policy toward Syria, which had previously subcontracted everything to regional actors, most notably to Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The critical divergence between the American and Turkish positions during the siege of Kobane proved to be consequential and poisoned the two allies' relations. The United States determined that the YPG was the most capable and reliable force to fight for the US on the ground against IS and decided to support it in spite of vociferous objections from Ankara.

In the meantime, as the Pentagon decided that airstrikes alone would not be able to defeat the IS, the Obama administration initiated a series of special programs designed to arm and train the Syrian opposition without committing American soldiers to ground warfare, in line with the administration's policy of "no boots on the ground." In September 2014, the US Congress appropriated $500m for the train-and-equip program with the aim of training and vetting 5,000 members of the Syrian opposition by the end of 2015. The US hoped that by training and equipping a proxy force of Syrian rebels they might be able to rely on these forces to support US efforts against IS and other terrorist organizations in Syria. The administration believed that these force may also help in "setting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to Syria's

(33) Colin Kahl, "The United States and Turkey Are on a Collision Course in Syria", *Foreign Policy*, 12 May 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/12/the-united-states-and-turkey-are-on-a-collision-course-in-syria-trump/ (Accessed 3 December 2017).

civil war."[34] The locations of training facilities have not been publicly acknowledged, but according to various press reports Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have hosted program activities.[35]

The complex nature of the Syrian conflict and the conflicting interests of the local allies have made the success of the train-and-equip program exasperatingly unlikely. The anti-IS focus of the program alienated vetted fighters whose primary goal was to topple the Assad regime. Not surprisingly, the controversial program finished in an embarrassing failure when al-Nusra Front militants attacked the headquarters of US-backed fighters in July 2015.[36] An additional embarrassment came when General Lloyd Austin, head of the US Central Command, testified to Congress that there were only 4-5 US trained militants fighting IS in September 2015.[37]

In October 2015, the Obama administration changed the program's focus toward equipping select vetted fighters inside Syria, instead of training them in neighboring countries.[38] Accordingly an Arab-Kurdish coalition force in northern Syria known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) became the most effective operational partner of the US in combat against IS. The SDF's strategic military objective of cleaning northeastern Syria from IS so that it could consolidate its own political control over an autonomous region was concurrent with the American objectives.

(34) Christopher M. Blanchard et al., "Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress", 9 June 2015, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R43727.pdf (Accessed 9 December 2017).

(35) Soner Cagaptay and Andrew J. Tabler, "Regional Dimensions of the Syria Train-and-Equip Program", *PolicyWatch,* 10 April 2015, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/regional-dimensions-of-the-syria-train-and-equip-program (Accessed 11 May 2018).

(36) Kareem Shaheen, "US-trained Syrian Rebels Killed and Leaders Captured by al-Qaida Affiliate", *The Guardian*, 31 July 2015.

(37) Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Only 4 to 5 American-trained Syrians fighting against the Islamic State", *Washington Post,* 16 September 2015.

(38) Douglas Lovelace Jr., *Terrorism: Commentary on Security Documents Volume 143: The Evolution of the Islamic State*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 27 October 2016, p. 190.

Founded in 2015, with the YPG militia constituting its backbone,[39] non-Kurdish fighters would soon become nearly forty percent of SDF forces.[40] According to Stein, the SDF's pragmatic relationship with the Syrian regime proved quite effective for its recruitment efforts as the YPG would be "focused on Arab tribes and families that were not committed to regime change."[41]

Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis fundamentally changed the balance of power on the ground and contributed to the durability of the Assad regime. When Russia started launching airstrikes in Syria, the US and Russia signed a de-confliction agreement in October 2015 to ensure that US and Russian air forces would not engage one other.[42] The Euphrates eventually emerged as an informal 'de-confliction' line between the Russian-backed forces to the west of the river and the US-backed forces to the east. Thus, the US found a *modus vivendi* with its Cold War rival. This particular arrangement between the two powers underscored the relative unimportance of Syria as a strategic concern for the US at the time, despite the fact that Eastern Mediterranean was rising as a critical area for geo-economic competition, mainly because of recent energy discoveries.

Thus, under President Obama, American policy towards Syria struck observers as unfocused, haphazard and a failure, disappointing

(39) Https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Syrian_Democratic_Forces.html (Accessed 20 March 2018).

(40) Barak Barfi, "Ascent of the PYD and the SDF", *Research Notes*, No 32, April 2016, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote32-Barfi.pdf (Accessed 11 May 2018).

(41) Aaron Stein, "Partner Operations in Syria: Partner Operations in Syria: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward," *Atlantic Council*, July 2017, p. 12

(42) "US and Russia Sign Deal to Avoid Syria Air Incidents", *BBC News,* 20 October 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34588286 (Accessed 11 May 2018).

friends and allies.[43] His decision not to honor his own pledge that using chemical weapons was a 'red line', the crossing of which would bring about swift retaliation, came to symbolize the shambolic conduct of his administration. That the Syrian regime would ultimately have to give up the bulk of its chemical arsenal did not rescue his reputation. Nor did the fact that he was just in favor of a non-interventionist policy in a country where the US did not have vital national security interests.[44] The argument that since America's fingers were badly burnt by the unsuccessful war in Iraq that proved disastrous for that country and its people, avoiding a similar 'gamble' in Syria would be wise was not sufficiently persuasive for Obama's critics either.[45]

The Trump Twist

So far, American policy towards the Levant under President Trump has been difficult to nail down when it comes to the festering conflict in Syria and radically off the beaten track concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With the ascent of the new administration, the central focus of the American presence in and involvement with Syria would evolve towards the containment, if not the rollback of Iran, even though that goal was not part of the initial military objective of the United States.

In an aside during a speech he gave in Ohio at the beginning of April 2018, President Trump surprised friend and foe alike by suggesting that he would wish to withdraw troops from Syria "very soon."[46] This came as a shock to most observers of American policy as well as members of the administration since as of late January it looked like the US policy was finally set on a seemingly consistent course. In his speech at the Hoover Institute at Stanford, Trump's firstSecretary of State Rex Tillerson articulated a policy whereby the US would maintain its military presence in Syria in order to completely eradicate IS and added, "we cannot make the same mistakes that were made in 2011…when a premature departure from Iraq allowed al-Qaida in Iraq to survive and eventually morph into IS."[47] Now Trump was going against the advice of his national security team and insisting on withdrawal within six months. Whether or not such an exit will take place cannot be ascertained at this point. It is clear though that this new position contradicts both the military's overwhelming desire to finish off IS in Syria and Iraq and the desire to contain Iranian influence in Syria and beyond.[48]

The primary reason for the US troop presence in Syria was ostensibly to fight IS. In the wake of the territorial losses the terrorist organization suffered throughout 2017 and 2018 which ended its claim to a caliphate in Syrian and Iraqi territories, the real target has arguably begun to shift. As Pillar argues, there is mission creep for the American military by the "habitual use of the misleading vacuum metaphor, according to which not just US involvement but physical and preferably military involvement to fill a space is needed to counter bad-by-definition Iranian or Russian influence in that same space."[49]

(43) Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*.

(44) Ibid.

(45) John Cassidy, "Obama's Foreign-Policy 'Failures': A Word for the Defense", *New Yorker*, 7 May 2014 https://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/obamas-foreign-policy-failures-a-word-for-the-defense (Accessed 1 November 2017); and Josef Joffe, "Obama's Greta Garbo moment", *The American Interest*, https://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/04/08/obamas-greta-garbo-moment/ (Accessed 28 October 2017).

(46) Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Trump Drops Push for Immediate Withdrawal of Troops From Syria", *The New York Times,* 4 April 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/world/middleeast/trump-syria-troops.html (11 May 2018).

(47) Rex Tillerson, "The Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria", https://www.hoover.org/news/rex-tillerson-hoover-institution (Accessed 1 February 2018).

(48) Ibid.

(49) Paul Pillar, "The Sources of Mission Creep in Syria, *National Interest*, http://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/the-sources-mission-creep-syria-23609 (Accessed 1 March 2018).

Initially, Trump kept Obama's Syria policy basically intact when he assumed office in January 2017. He did intensify it though. Contrary to Obama's policy of inaction, the Trump administration launched the first deliberate American military action against the Assad regime when the President ordered the firing of 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles against the al-Shayrat Air Force Base in response to the regime's use of chemical weapons in April 2017.50 Trump's decision to launch missile strikes caught the world by surprise since he previously opposed intervening against the regime even on humanitarian grounds.[51] Not surprisingly, Trump's ad hoc airstrikes yielded neither decisive military gain nor political result in Syria, as they were not coupled with a coherent plan of action. Many saw this one-time strike, too easily in our judgment, as Trump's tactical move to divert attention away from problems at home.[52] Overall though, it is hard to argue that the attack on a Syrian airbase represented a shift in the US foreign policy towards Syria that was set by the Obama administration. Like his predecessor, "Trump never viewed Syria as strategically important for the US, and as a result never sought to push for a new approach to the conflict there."53 Yet in time, as Iran gained center stage in American strategic calculations in the Levant and the old ties to Saudi Arabia were revitalized, Syria would acquire more meaning in US calculations.
The Trump administration continued to deepen its ties with the SDF through the authorization of a direct shipment of arms to the YPG in

(50) Michael R. Gordon, Helene Cooper and Michael D. Shear, "Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria", *The New York Times,* 6 April 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-attack.html (Accessed 19 December 2017).

(51) Yasmeen Serhan, "Very Soon or Not So Soon': Parsing Trump on Syria", *The Atlantic*, 12 April 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/trump-syria/557768/ (Accessed 11 May 2018).

(52) Ibrahim Al-Marashi, "Trump's Strike on Syria: A Convenient Distraction", *Al Jazeera,* 8 April 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/04/donald-trumps-symbolic-strike-syria-170407122029617.html (Accessed 18 December 2017).

(53) Michael Young, "From Sad to Asad," *Diwan,* 6 July 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/71423 (Accessed 13 January 2018).

an effort to defeat IS on the battlefield. In combatting IS, the Trump administration indeed followed the previous administration's strategy but there were some tactical changes such as the deployment of more special forces closer to the fight, and by allowing commanders on the ground to make battlefield decisions without waiting to hear from Washington.[54] As Riedel puts it, "Obama fashioned the strategy, the alliance and assembled the forces to destroy the caliphate, but the culmination of the process has occurred on Trump's watch."[55] In the final stage, the Trump administration has taken credit for the two significant victories against the IS: the recapturing of the Iraqi city of Mosul in July 2017, and of Raqqa, the *de facto* capital of the IS in northern Syria, in October 2017. Ironically, the fall of Mosul was made possible by the not so insignificant assistance of Iranian backed Shi'a militias, Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces).[56]

The deepening tactical alliance between the US and SDF has continued to aggravate tensions between Washington and Ankara. Turkey believes that an autonomous entity in northern Syria under the PYD/YPG leadership posed a vital threat to its own security. Therefore it set a firm red line and demanded from its NATO ally that PYD/YPG forces be not allowed to deploy to the West of the Euphrates river. Despite promises made to Ankara the US military allowed the Kurdish forces to be part of SDF presence in the strategically critical town of Manbij to the West of Euphrates. Although Turkey maintained open lines of communication open with the PYD, whose leader Salih Muslim made numerous visits to

(54) Glenn Kessler, "Trump's Claim that He's Done More 'by far' Than Obama in the Fight Against ISIS", *The Washington Post*, 25 October 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/10/25/trumps-claim-that-hes-done-by-far-more-than-obama-in-the-fight-against-isis/?utm_term=.f4abc82accb6 (Accessed 27 November 2017).

(55) Ibid.

(56) Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future", *Carnegie Paper*, 28 April 2017, https://www.negie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810 (Accessed 12 May 2018).

Ankara, until mid-June 2015, it continued to treat the YPG as an affiliate of the PKK. Thus, cutting the cross-border links between the PKK and the YPG has evolved into the highest strategic priority in Turkey's Syria policy.[57] Even though the US considers the PKK a terrorist organization, both the Obama and Trump administrations have insisted that the PYD/YPG is not on their terrorist organizations list.[58] Turkey's various efforts to convince the US to end its cooperation with the YPG and work with Turkish-backed forces have proved fruitless, and the US continued to support the YPG in the fight against IS, "partly driven by a desire to avoid becoming enmeshed in the conflict."[59]

The growing mistrust between Turkey and the US led Ankara to act alone, leading it to launch *Operation Euphrates Shield* on August 24, 2016, with the support of Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters. Ankara's officially declared goals were to fight against IS in Syria and to maintain border security. However, Turkey was much more concerned with preventing the emergence of a PYD-controlled zone near its border. Ultimately, the operation was made possible by the reconciliation between Turkey and Russia whose relations had deteriorated considerably in the wake of the downing of a Russian RU-24 by Turkish F-16s.[60] The Russians who controlled the air space in Syria allowed Turkey to use its air force during the operation.

(57) Aaron Stein and Michelle Foley, "The YPG and PKK Connection", *Atlantic Council*, 26 January 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ypg-pkk-connection (Accessed 13 May 2018).

(58) Ibid.

(59) Amanda Sloat, "Turkey Wants to Crush US Allies in Syria. That Shouldn't Surprise Anybody", *Foreign Policy,* 24 January 2018, http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/23/turkey-wants-to-crush-u-s-allies-in-syria-that-shouldnt-surprise-anybody/ (Accessed 1 March 2018).

(60) Can Kasapoglu and Sinan Ülgen, "Operation Euphrates Shield and the Al-Bab Campaign: A Strategic Assessment", *EDAM Foreign Policy and Security Paper Series*, No 1, 2017, p. 10, http://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/elbab_eng.pdf (Accessed 12 May 2018).

Following the seizure of the town of al-Bab, Turkey repeatedly stated its desire to push YPG from Manbij to the east of Euphrates River. Despite the Turkish 'red line' of no YPG presence on the western bank of the river, the US continued to strengthen its ties with the Kurdish fighters in Manbij in preparation for the Raqqa operation. This, in turn, further strained the relations between the US and Turkey. Eventually, the Trump administration excluded Turkey and its affiliates from the Raqqa operation.[61]

By the time of Turkey's second military incursion in Syria, *Operation Olive Branch* that sought to clear the province of Afrin from YPG fighters, a debate intensified among foreign policy and security experts in Washington. This debate concerned the choice the administration had to make between continuing the fight against IS with the Kurds or forsaking them in favor of a closer co-operation with NATO ally Turkey. Based on numerous articles published in the US, one could ascertain that the consensus view was not to abandon Turkey, although Ankara's commitment to NATO and to its alliance with the US were deemed suspect by some pundits.[62] Yet, given the number of outstanding issues between the two allies, including the intensity of the mistrust between them and the lack of a clear common objective, it would have indeed been a tall order to find a functional *modus vivendi*. In the meantime, Russia has managed to lure Turkey towards itself, a strategy with as yet unknown consequences for Turkey's place in and relations with the members of the Atlantic Alliance. As this book went to press Turkey and the United

(61) Turkey offered to set up an army of 10,000 TAF-supported local fighters to liberate Raqqa from IS. Fehim Tastekin, "Is Turkey Trying to Disrupt Raqqa Operation", *Al-Monitor*, 27 April 2017.

(62) The following are a sampling of articles on the matter: Amanda Sloat, "The West's Turkey Conundrum", Brookings-Robert Bosch Foundation Transatlantic Initiative, February 2018; Walter Russel Mead, "Getting to Yes with Turkey", *Wall Street Journal*, 12 March 2018; David Ignatius, "It's time to untangle the mess in Syria. Here's how to do it", *Washington Post*, 7 February 2018; Nick Danforth, "The Only Thing Turkey and the U.S. Can Agree On", https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/10/opinion/turkey-united-states-erdogan.html (Accessed 10 March 2018).

States reached an agreement on Manbij. The last Kurdish troops left the region by mid-July.[63] However, despite this move that may usher in a new, less conflictual period between Ankara and Washington, the American commitment to Kurds has not disappeared either.

What is Next: US Policies in post-IS Levant

In the aftermath of the territorial defeat of the self-proclaimed caliphate of the IS in Iraq and Syria, the greatest uncertainty centers on 'the day after' in Syria. According to Parsi, "the absence of a clear order draws all major powers into a fierce competition to define the new equilibrium. This is also why Israel and Saudi Arabia have found common cause against Iran and why they have been pushing the US to take military action against Iran."[64] It seems that all relevant stakeholders in the Syrian conflict — to various degrees — are concerned by the increasing influence of Iran in Syria's future as well as in the wider region. Therefore, the weakening of Iranian dominance in Syria and beyond would be more likely to shape the basic determinants of US policy towards the Levant in the post-IS period. The Trump administration suspects that Iran is seeking to establish a long-term foothold in Syria to build an international corridor of influence stretching from Tehran to Beirut.[65]

As the transition from the Obama to the Trump administration took place, the former's more relaxed and permissive approach to widening

(63) Carlotta Gall, "US and Turks Agree on Kurds' Withdrawal from Syrian Town", *New York Times,* 4 June 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-kurds-manbij.html (Accessed 15 July 2018).

(64) Trita Parsi, "Saudi Arabia Wants to Fight Iran to the Last American", *The National Interest*, 15 November 2017, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/saudi-arabia-wants-fight-iran-the-last-american-23212 (Accessed 1 December 2017).

(65) Tom O'Connor, "How the US Lost the War in Syria to Russia and Iran", *Newsweek,* 10 November 2017.

Iranian hegemonic presence in Iraq and Syria came to an end. Not only were Saudi Arabia and Israel gravely concerned with Iran's ambitions and actual power projection capabilities in their neighborhood, many of the principals in the Trump security team, including Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford, Trump's second Secretary of State Max Pompeo and his third National Security Adviser John Bolton believed in the necessity of containing, if not rolling back, Iran and its proxies in the region.[66] Therefore, the Trump administration moved closer to America's traditional allies and began to challenge the validity of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which Trump declared he was going to opt out of during his campaign. On May 8, 2018 he finally announced US withdrawal from JCPOA.[67]

The presence of Iranian-backed militias in Syria has also particularly worried Tel Aviv, which was intent on preventing Iran-backed forces from establishing a permanent presence in Syria.[68] Creating a buffer zone along Israel's border with Syria is one of the ideas proposed as a solution.[69] In July 2017, a confidential cease-fire agreement for southwestern Syria was signed between the US and Russia to ban Iranian forces and their proxies, including Hezbollah, from near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.[70] The

(66) Richard Sokolsky and Aaron David Miller, "Trump's Policy on Iran: Dr. Jeykll and Mr Hyde", *Real Clear World*, 12 January 2018, http://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/12/trump-s-policy-on-iran-dr.-jekyll-and-mr.-hyde-pub-75249 (Accessed 11 May 2018).

(67) Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, 8 May 2018, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action/ (Accessed 11 May 2018).

(68) Josh Lederman at al., "US, Russia seek understanding on next steps in Syria", *The Washington Post*, 10 November 2017, https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-11-09/syria-deal-in-the-works-ahead-of-likely-trump-putin-meeting (Accessed 11 December 2017).

(69) Ibid.

(70) Colum Lynch et al., "Secret Details of Trump-Putin Syria Cease-fire Focus on Iranian Proxies", *Foreign Policy,* 11 July 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/11/exclusive-trump-putin-ceasefire-agreement-focuses-on-iranian-backed-fighters-middle-east/ (Accessed 1 March 2018).

agreement aimed to transform southern Syria into an exclusion zone for 'non-Syrian origin', namely Iranian, troops and their proxies, as well as al-Qaida and IS fighters. Given the track record of Russia's ability to persuade Iranian-backed militia groups and the Syrian regime to comply with a 'de-confliction zone' in southeastern Syria since May 2017, the enforcement mechanisms of the agreement raise important questions.[71] However, it indicates that American anxiety about the Iranian presence in Syria is also shared, to some extent, by Russia.

Saudi Arabia has also escalated its anti-Iran policies thanks to Trump administration's animus towards Iran. Trump's approach has radically departed from Obama's policy of accommodating Tehran with an intention to make the latter a responsible power in the region. Trump has turned a blind eye to Saudi Arabia's destabilizing moves across the region, including its support for extremist jihadi organizations and its destructive strikes against the Houthis in Yemen. The young Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's search for hegemonic domination in the Persian Gulf and Trump's policy of preventing Iran from consolidating 'an arc of influence', consisting of land corridors across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, has created a closer relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia in the new era. Saudi Arabia's botched attempt to force Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri's resignation has shown that the Saudis are becoming more and more invested in the international politics of the Levant, if for no other reason than containing Iran in the post-IS period.

The Saudis' crude foreign policy considerations in Lebanon backfired when France successfully mediated to solve the resignation crisis before Lebanon was dragged into sectarian tension.[72] However, Saudi Arabia's

(71) Ibid.

(72) Annabelle Timsit, "The Strange Case of Lebanon, France, and a Prime Minister's Unresignation", *The Atlantic,* 5 December 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/macron-hariri-france-iran-saudi-arabia/547391/ (Accessed 22 May 2018).

main nemesis Hezbollah and its allies obtained more than half of the seats in the 128-members parliament during parliamentary elections held on May 6, 2018. Owing to that electoral victory, Hezbollah has reasserted its power and heralded a new popular legitimacy in Lebanese politics and beyond.[73] As Sobelman argues:

> two wars later -one with Israel, another one in Syria- Hezbollah is a battle-hardened actor with regional influence, political clout, and a fierce military arsenal of 150,000 rockets and other advanced military hardware. Its bargaining position within the Lebanese political arena is stronger than ever.[74]

The escalating confrontations between Israel and Iran in Syria carry the real possibility of another war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, a likelihood both sides tried to avoid after the last Lebanon war in July 2006. Israel recently launched a massive air operation against Iranian military installations in Syria, which was the largest attack it carried out in Syria since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war.[75] Should Israel continue to conduct airstrikes in Syria, Hezbollah may find it difficult not to engage in the conflict at a time when the regional order is being reshaped in the Levant. Russia gave tacit support for the Israeli strikes against the Iranian military assets in Syria. President Putin received PM Netanyahu warmly in Moscow right after these strikes. Yet, Moscow also sets limits to what Tel Aviv can do inside Syria. An agreement that involved Jordan, the US, Russia and

(73) Hanin Ghaddar, "What Does Hezbollah's Election Victory Mean for Lebanon?", *The Washington Institute Policywatch*, 8 May 2017, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-does-hezbollahs-election-victory-mean-for-lebanon (Accessed 20 May 2017).

(74) Daniel Sobelman, "Preventing the Next Big War in the Middle East", *The National Interest*, 26 April 2018, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/preventing-the-next-big-war-the-middle-east-25586 (Accessed 22 May 2018).

(75) Alex Lockie, "Putin May Have Given Israeli PM Netanyahu The Green Light to Wipe Out Iran in Syria in a Massive Air War", *Business Insider, 10 May 2018*, http://www.businessinsider.com/putin-given-israeli-pm-netanyahu-the-green-light-to-hit-iran-in-syria-2018-5 (Accessed 22 May 2018).

Israel gives some hints about a *modus vivendi* between the US and Russia and a common desire by involved parties to keep Iran and Hezbollah away from the Golan Heights. [76]

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the US policies towards the Levant have maintained both a degree of continuity between former President Barack Obama and his successor President Donald Trump and a significant shift in regional geopolitical preferences concerning Iran. According to Cook, the continuity stems from the US's adherence to the three age-old, basic components of its approach to the region: "fighting terrorism, containing Iran, and supporting Israel."[77]

Despite his erratic rhetoric and intellectual inconsistency, Trump's policies "get the United States back to basics in the Middle East –securing the oil flow, assisting Israel, holding Iran in check, and fighting terrorists."[78] While the Obama administration chose to accommodate Iran in order to hold that country's nuclear program in check, Trump reversed the policy of accommodation and sought for Israel and Saudi Arabia to contain the Iranian threat. What is not clear is the extent to which Israel and Saudi Arabia could succeed in diminishing the Iranian sphere of influence in the Levant. However, as Mead concludes, "the more active America's Middle East allies, the smaller the risk of heavy American engagement in a Middle East ground war."[79] And this appears to be the single most important priority for the incumbent president.

(76) Osama Al Sharif, "Daraa Takeover: The Penultimate Chapter of Syrian War", *The Jordan Times*, 26 June 2018, http://jordantimes.com/opinion/osama-al-sharif/daraa-takeover-penultimate-chapter-syrian-war (Accessed 15 July 2018).

(77) Steven Cook, "Trump's Middle East Strategy is Totally Boring", *Foreign Policy*, 21 February 2018, http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/21/trumps-middle-east-strategy-is-totally-boring/ (Accessed 20 May 2018).

(78) Ibid.

(79) Walter Russel Mead, "Trump, Iran and American Power", *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 May 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-iran-and-american-power-1526338180 (Accessed 16 May 2018).

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NOTES

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