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## **THE ROLE OF SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN DURING AND AFTER THE UPHEAVAL IN THE ARAB WORLD**

*Ellinor Zeino-Mahmalat*

The upheaval in the Arab world has challenged the traditional roles of the two leading powers in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both nations must now reassess their relationships with regional actors (particularly with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Assad regime). For both nations, long-standing alliances are at stake (Egypt and Syria). While the upheaval in the Arab world holds both opportunities and risks for the Saudi regime, Iran, with the support of the Assad regime, is increasingly finding itself in quite a strategic quandary. Further developments in Syria, Egypt and even in Iraq and Bahrain will significantly define the future balance of power in Saudi Arabia and Iran.

At the same time, the traditionally authoritarian countries' partnerships with both democratically elected leadership, as in Tunisia, and socio-politically broken countries, such as Syria and Iraq, are proving to be rather volatile and difficult to calculate. Traditionally, Saudi Arabia and Iran have competed for leadership in the Gulf region and beyond. Their rivalry frequently emerges in regional trouble spots, just as is currently the case with the Syrian civil war. Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, all of which have survived upheavals, form the core zone of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In the process, Saudi Arabia and Iran are also competing for interpretative sovereignty over regional upheavals. Both sides are anxious to re-frame the transformation processes in the Arab world to fit their own interests.

## **CHANGES IN THE REGIONAL BALANCE OF POWER SINCE THE IRAQ WAR IN 2003**

To gain an understanding of the political position of Saudi Arabia and especially Iran in the region, we must go back at least to the Iraq War, beginning in 2003 and Iraq's reorganisation after the 2004 national elections.

The 2003 Iraq War, which saw dictator Saddam Hussein overthrown, represented an historic turning point for Saudi Arabia and Iran and constituted a dramatic realignment of their balance of power in the region. With the upheavals and transformations in the Arab world since 2011, even riots preceding the Iranian presidential election in 2009, both regimes are facing new political challenges both domestically and within the region as a whole.

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The U.S.-led overthrow of the regime in Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent development of the first Shiite-led Iraqi government under President Nuri Al-Maliki shaped the assumption that Iran would gain power in the traditionally Sunni-led Arab world and shaped the idea of a "Shiite crescent"<sup>1</sup> that would politically, militarily and ideologically challenge the Sunni world. The rise of pro-Iranian powers was observed in the region between 2006 and 2010. The U.S.'s withdrawal from Iraq and the creation of a Shia-dominated Iraqi government, the resumption of Iran's uranium enrichment programme in February 2006, the regional consolidation of Hezbollah after its war with Israel in 2006 and Hamas' assumption of political control in the Gaza Strip – a Sunni group supported by Iran at the time – all strengthened Iran's influence and self-assurance in the region. The Saudi leadership viewed Iran's influence as especially dramatic. When a drastic increase in Iranian-Shia influence was feared after the 2005 Iraqi national elections, an embittered Saud Al-Faisal, Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, spoke of the fact that the U.S. handed Iraq to Iran.<sup>2</sup> From then on, Iran was seen in the Arabic Gulf

- 1 | The term "Shiite crescent" was first used by Jordanian King Abdullah in 2004 to describe pro-Iranian, Shiite powers' increased influence in the region. The caricature of the Shiite crescent includes Iran, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.
- 2 | As Prince Saud Al-Faisal said in his speech before the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations in New York in September 2005.

states as a virtual, albeit unintended, profiteer of the Iraq War.<sup>3</sup>



Commemorating the victims of the "Green Movement": Brutal actions against protesters led to a considerable loss of respect for the Iranian political model. | Source: Wen Zhang, flickr (CC BY).

Iran's newly gained self-assurance given the regional developments in Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza that were beneficial to the Iranian regime was clouded in 2009 by the most fervid domestic protests in the Republic of Iran's existence. The Revolutionary Guard's brutal actions against protests by the "Green Movement" and the manipulation of the Iranian presidential elections both led to a considerable loss of respect for the Iranian political model by the citizens of neighbouring Arab countries. Though President Ahmadinejad was able to achieve significant popularity within some Arabic sectors of the population several years earlier with his anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian plea, the Iranian political regime has since been discredited as a possible "export model" for the Islamic Arab world.<sup>4</sup>

3 | For more on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the Gulf see Ellinor Zeino-Mahmalat, "Saudi-Arabiens und Irans Regionalpolitik zwischen Ideologie und Pragmatismus", in: *GIGA Focus Nahost*, 1/2009, [http://giga-hamburg.de/dl/download.php?d=/content/publikationen/pdf/gf\\_nahost\\_0901.pdf](http://giga-hamburg.de/dl/download.php?d=/content/publikationen/pdf/gf_nahost_0901.pdf) (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

4 | According to polls by U.S. opinion poll center Zogby International.

Since 2011, the upheavals in the Arab world have sparked prolonged and still immeasurable socio-political transformation processes. As of now, only the losers, not the winners, of these processes have become apparent. The transformations may hold both opportunities as well as risks for the Saudi Gulf monarchy. If the Saudi regime was shocked by how quickly the U.S. abandoned its long-time ally in the case of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, it has only served to drive Saudi Arabia to support the Syrian freedom fighters' campaign against the Assad regime that much more vehemently. The Saudi royal family views the regime, which has been allied with Iran for over 30 years, as an uncomfortable neighbour. In the Saudi leadership's estimation, a new, Sunni, Islamic conservative state in Syria, independent of Iran, could be a valuable regional partner in the future.

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#### **THE REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF ROLES: SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN AS EQUAL COMPETITORS?**

Saudi Arabia and Iran, both competing for regional dominance, were developing a traditional balance of power in the Gulf with Iraq in the middle geographically; this has faltered since the Iraqi regime was overthrown in 2003. Both states initially showed obvious similarities in terms of their global strategic and economic conditions. As the OPEC cartel's two largest oil producers with the world's largest proven oil reserves, both states have simultaneously developed into exemplary rentier states; resource rents from oil (and gas) cover more than 50 per cent of their public budgets. On the one hand, the high oil revenues, which are freely available to the regimes to a large extent, supply the states with a high degree of autonomy in domestic and foreign policy. On the other hand, they are existentially dependent on the international market for oil, on buyer countries, strategic allies and on continuous provisions for oil-financed welfare programmes, public jobs and multiple benefits generated domestically.

Fig. 1

**Crude oil reserves worldwide (in million barrels)**

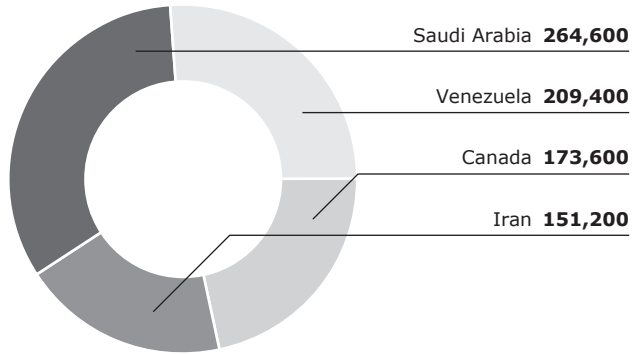


Fig. 2

**Crude oil production worldwide (in million barrels)**

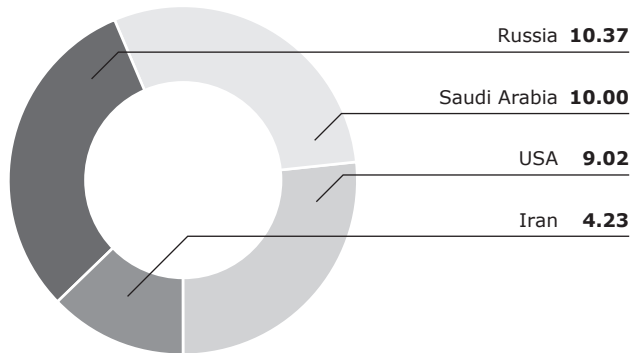
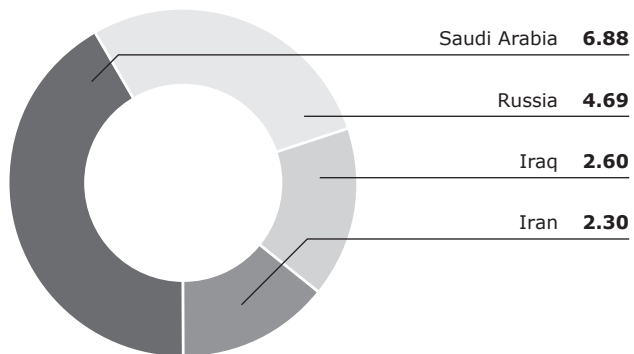


Fig. 3

**Crude oil export worldwide (in million barrels)**



Source: CIA, "The World Factbook", as of 2013, numbers rounded.

The geostrategic circumstances alone allow for a clearly defined framework for action, yet fail to adequately define and understand both nations' domestic and foreign policy

strategies. Nationally constructed identities and an historically-expanded understanding of foreign policy roles aid in clarifying the motivation for domestic and foreign policies and identifying the creation of and changes to the definition of national interests.<sup>5</sup> Both Saudi Arabia and Iran define themselves as Islamic states whose actions are religiously motivated and justified. Even when both states act as the protector and leading power of the Sunni and Shia faiths, respectively, they claim at the same time they are representing and protecting the interests of the entire Muslim community (*ummah*) and are promoting Muslim unity across denominational and national borders.

The ideological basis for both states depends upon a reformed and state-defined political version of Islam. In terms of foreign policy this state-specified reform Islam manifests itself divergently when it comes to choosing allies, despite common religious-based political principles (solidarity with the Muslim community/*ummah* – particularly with the Palestinians, rejection of Zionist thought and the Israeli state in principle, rejection of Western values for their own communities).

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Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the erstwhile “twin pillars” of the U.S.’s security policy in the Middle East during the 1970s have evolved from friendly rivals to two of the region’s most vehemently ideological opponents.

The history of a long and violent unification process and the expansion of the Islamic faith across the Arabian Peninsula pre-dates the emergence of the modern Saudi Arabian state. The Saudi state’s “nation building” was understood to be a religious mission in that it served the broader theme of uniting the Muslim community.<sup>6</sup> All forms of denominational, tribal or provincial senses of belonging were denounced as sources of division and disintegration (*fitna*) in the rhetoric of the Saudi state.<sup>7</sup> Allegiance to the

5 | See Ellinor Zeino-Mahmalat, *Saudi Arabia’s and Iran’s Iraq Policies in the Post-Gulf War Era. Re-Thinking Foreign Policy Analysis in the Gulf at the Intersection of Power, Interests, and Ideas*, Hamburg University, 2012.

6 | See Neil Partrick, *Nationalism in the Gulf States*, American University of Sharjah, 2009, 6 et sqq.

7 | See Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 191.

country's leader was proclaimed a Muslim duty according to the discourse of national jurists (*ulama*). The ongoing protests within the country (e.g. in the heavily Shiite Eastern Province) were subsequently deemed disobedient and disruptive to the community.



Pilgrims in Mecca: The Saudi leadership views itself not only as the natural leader of the Muslim world, but also defender of Arab interests, particularly in the Gulf. | Source: A.K. Photography, flickr (CC BY-SA).

Alongside Saudi Arabia's emerging position as the cradle of Islam and Arab civilisation, as well as the guardian of both the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the Saudi leadership views the country not only as the natural leader of the Muslim world and defender of the true faith, but also defender of regional and particularly Arab interests in the Gulf. This has manifested itself in several Saudi attempts and initiatives to gain influence in regional politics. Among them are, for example, Saudi King Abdullah's Arab-Israeli Peace Initiative in 2002 (then still the Crown Prince), the 2011 Saudi attempt at conciliation in Yemen or the deployment of Saudi and Emirati troops to Bahrain in 2012 to stabilise the Bahraini dynasty. The Arabian Peninsula's smaller neighbouring countries in particular are seen as Saudi Arabia's backyard, in that weaker states like Yemen or Bahrain are in some cases treated as Saudi provinces.<sup>8</sup>

8 | Cf. Bernard Haykel, "Saudi-Arabia and Qatar in a Time of Revolution", *CSIS Gulf Analysis Paper*, Feb 2013, Washington D.C., 5.

The Saudi demands for a religious and regional political leadership role have been challenged by the Iranian Republic, which feels a national sense of cultural and civilizational superiority. The Islamic Republic of Iran represents a counter-model to the Saudi monarchical government, deemed un-Islamic, and it has long boasted that it is the only state in the region that has undergone an "Islamic" revolution and successfully carried out the experiment of "Islamic democracy".<sup>9</sup> These feelings of being a great power and of Iranian superiority are simultaneously accompanied by a perceived victimisation and a long-standing experience of regional exclusion and vulnerability. This external self-image has been energised by a combination of Persian nationalism, Shia Islam and revolutionary anti-imperialism. Iran's external self-image is thus not only a religious one, but is also grounded in nationalism. National independence, Islamic-defined justice and revolutionary resistance are considered guiding principles for foreign policy action and serve as principles of foreign policy alignment. The Iranian leadership's anti-imperialism and associated Third World rhetoric imply a foreign policy position that is anti-status-quo regarding overcoming the current regional and international order, which is seen as unjust. The ingrained and prevalent distrust found not only within the Iranian regime but also in Iranian society against foreign interference in the region<sup>10</sup> is currently manifesting itself in the Iranian

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9 | Johannes Reissner describes Iran's political system as a "hybrid system" with republican, partly democratic and theocratic elements. See Johannes Reissner, "Iran: Autokratischer Islamo-Nationalismus mit Erdölposter", in: Enno Harks and Friedemann Müller (eds.), *Petrostaaten. Außenpolitik im Zeichen von Öl*, Baden-Baden, Nomos-Verlag, 2007, 35-53, here: 38. The President and Parliament are democratically elected following prior assessment of the candidates by the Guardian Council, a kind of constitutional court. According to the principle of "Guardianship of the Highest Jurist" (*velayat-e faqih*), ultimate state power rests with the religious leader. The religious leader is chosen by the Assembly of Experts, a council comprised of 86 "virtuous and experienced" clerics elected by the people every eight years (following prior candidate assessment by the Guardian Council).

10 | Although Iran was never completely colonised, it has experienced long periods of recurrent foreign interference. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Iran (and Persia up until 1935) was forced to accept a series of treaties and concessions imposed by foreign countries, including the Tobacco Concession in 1890 and the oil concession in 1901, both imposed by Great Britain. ▶



regime's allegations of foreign conspiracy regarding the crisis in Syria or, along with the idea of the "Shiite crescent", the accusation that pro-Western powers are stirring up regional "Shia phobia".

**While the Arab world speaks mostly of "Arab" protests and the "Arab Spring", the Iranian regime describes the protests as a regional "Islamic awakening".**

Differing perceptions and lines of argument regarding the upheavals in the Arab world have been pitted against one another since the outbreak of protests in 2011. While the Arab world speaks mostly of "Arab" protests and the "Arab Spring", the Iranian regime describes the protests as a regional "Islamic awakening" or "Islamic revolutions".<sup>11</sup> At the same time, as circumstances require, the protests have been denounced by Saudi jurists loyal to the regime as a source of *fitna*. Iran is eager to describe the Arab protests as a "pan-Islamic revolution" inspired by the Iranian Revolution in 1979. With the exception of the protests in Syria, which have been denounced as a foreign controlled Western conspiracy, the Iranian regime has redefined the upheavals in the Arab world as an historic extension of their revolution.

#### **SCENES OF SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY: EGYPT, YEMEN, BAHRAIN AND SYRIA**

The upheavals in the Arab world have altered Saudi Arabia's and Iran's geostrategic calculations in the region. Old conflict situations involving Saudi-Iranian rivalry (e.g. in Bahrain) have resurfaced since the revolutions and transformations in the Arab world began whilst regional alliances (above all with Egypt and Syria) are being renegotiated. In the process, despite the reciprocal inspiration and partly similar causes of the protests, each case must

In the 1940s, Iran faced a series of foreign occupation attempts by Great Britain and the Soviet Union. However, what has remained most clearly in the collective memory of the Iranian citizenry is the 1953 coup to overthrow the Iranian Mossadeq government, which was backed by the U.S. and Great Britain.

11 | For more on the Iranian perspective see Ali Adami and Najmieh Poursmaeili, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: the Islamic Awakening Case", in: *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, No. 4, 2013, 16 Apr 2013, 153 et sqq., <http://www.isrjournals.ir/images/pdf/Ali%20Adami%20&%20Najmieh%20Poursmaeili.pdf> (accessed 22 Jul 2013). Adami und Poursmaeili argue that the Arabian upheavals weakened Saudi Arabia's status in the region.

be considered individually. Due to varying domestic political constraints and varying regional and foreign interests and types of influence, the Arab protest movements have led to various outcomes.

Over the course of the regional protest movements, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated strategic deftness in adapting to particular situations. In light of the developments in Egypt, the Saudi leadership is awaiting further developments but has already provided the new Egyptian transitional government with generous financial assistance. They initiated a controlled changeover in Yemen but have opted for active intervention in Syria and Bahrain. In contrast, Iran has morally supported the protests against secular and (partly) pro-Western regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Bahrain. However, the riots in Syria have presented Iran with a political dilemma. In supporting the Syrian regime, Iran has gotten itself into a nearly irresolvable conflict. For both Saudi Arabia and Iran, regional political and ideological leadership in terms of active development of a regional balance of power is at stake during a time of critical regional upheaval.

**The riots in Syria have provided Iran with a political dilemma. In supporting the Syrian regime, Iran has gotten itself into an impossible conflict.**

#### **EGYPT: BETWEEN IRANIAN RAPPROCHEMENT AND ARAB "CO-OPERATIONAL DIVIDENDS"**

With regard to the further development of the political and ideological balance of power in the Middle East, Egypt's future position is questionable. The Egyptian leadership's political alignment may decidedly influence the region's political and ideological organisation as well as opportunities for Saudi-Iranian power projections.

#### **Saudi Arabia's recent exploration of its relationship with Egypt**

The Egyptian revolution and the Muslim Brotherhood's accession to power present a challenge for Saudi Arabia in two ways. First, the international Muslim Brotherhood is considered an ideological and power-political rival to Saudi state Wahhabist Islam. Second, the Saudi ruling dynasty fears a possible rapprochement between Egypt and Iran, or at the very least that the "Iran card" will be played

through a new Egyptian leadership that may possibly be more difficult to control or calculate.

The political ascension of the Muslim Brotherhood to the head of the government in Tunisia and (temporarily) in Egypt has been perceived by the Saudi ruling dynasty as well as other Gulf monarchies as a political, religious and ideological challenge. President Morsi's assumption of power in Egypt in June 2012 particularly alarmed the ruling families in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. While Dubai's police chief, Dahi Khalfan Tamim,<sup>12</sup> evaluated the Muslim Brotherhood's network as an equal threat to the Gulf's security as Iran and its transnational Shia networks in July 2012, Prince Nayef, once Saudi Crown Prince and Minister of Interior who died last year, had labelled the Muslim Brotherhood as the "source of all problems in the Muslim world" as early as 2002.<sup>13</sup>

**During the 1990 Kuwait crisis, the Muslim Brotherhood place themselves on the side of Saddam Hussein. The Saudi leadership accused them of inciting citizens to oppose the government.**

At the same time, Saudi Arabia granted Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood asylum for a long time under Nasser's repressive policies against the group in the 1950s and 1960s. The Muslim Brotherhood first evolved into a serious political rival in the 1990s. During the 1990 Kuwait crisis, they positioned themselves on the side of Saddam Hussein. The Saudi leadership accused the Muslim Brotherhood of radicalising Saudi citizens and inciting them to oppose the government. This resulted in national campaigns against the Muslim Brotherhood along with a series of arrests and a ban on organisations close to them.<sup>14</sup>

12 | In July 2012, Dubai's police chief warned of the international Muslim Brotherhood and an international conspiracy to overthrow the governments of the Arab Gulf states. Vis-a-vis the new governments led by the Muslim Brotherhood he warned against crossing the "red line" in the Gulf states. See Andrew Torchia et al., "Dubai police chief warns of Muslim Brotherhood, Iran threat", Reuters, 26 Jul 2012, <http://reuters.com/article/2012/07/26/us-emirates-police-brotherhood-idUSBRE86P10420120726> (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

13 | See *Dawn.com*, "Nayef blames Ikhwan for Arab world's problems", 29 Nov 2002, <http://archives.dawn.com/2002/11/29/int12.htm> (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

14 | In the 1990s, many members of the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated themselves with the protest movement *al-Sahwa al-Islamiyah* (Islamic Awakening), which argued against foreign, non-Muslim troops being stationed on Saudi soil as a result •

This Saudi leadership's scepticism and even enmity towards the Muslim Brotherhood is based more on (power) politics than religion. The Muslim Brotherhood's idea<sup>15</sup> of establishing an Islamic state through democratic elections conflicts with the Saudi leadership's concept of an Islamic state based on a feudal hereditary monarchy. Today, the Muslim Brotherhood is the only serious organised political power in Saudi society with a power structure that the Saudi ruling dynasty cannot control. Throughout the current upheavals in the Arab world, the Gulf monarchies' scepticism regarding the Muslim Brotherhood has only increased. This has manifested itself in the Gulf states' concern regarding possible ideological and political influences on their own citizens by Arab migrant workers. After 2011, many visas for Egyptian and Tunisian workers in the Gulf were not extended.

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Additionally, a lasting Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement or even an alliance between the two actors would be a considerable setback for the geostrategic and regional political balance of power in the Arab Gulf states. Especially after the painful alleged "loss" of Iraq, it is of great importance for the Arab Gulf monarchies that Egypt remains a stable and loyal power in the region.

Relations between President Morsi and Iran have been forming rather haltingly. Morsi had avoided overstepping the "red line" by normalising its relationship with Iran. President Morsi's regional policies during his short time in office can be described as Saudi-friendly realpolitik. Morsi's first foreign state visit took place in Saudi Arabia, where everything depended on securing desperately needed financial aid for Egypt. Egypt's financial reliance on the

of the Kuwait crisis. In 2011, several leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood supported the political reform movement in Saudi Arabia, as well as the petition to establish an independent council (*majlis ash-shurah*).

15 | However, the various Muslim Brotherhood groups in the Gulf states cannot be considered a solid bloc. Their agendas and relationship to particular leaders strongly vary between individual countries. See Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "The Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf: Prospects for Agitation", in: *Policywatch* 2087, 10 Jun 2013, The Washington Institute, <http://washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-muslim-brotherhood-in-the-gulf-prospects-for-agitation> (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

U.S. and the Arab Gulf states to be major lenders remains high. In addition, over one million Egyptians are working in the Gulf as guest workers. They generate considerable foreign exchange revenue and relieve the Egyptian job market at the same time.

When the Egyptian military council ousted President Morsi on 3 July and appointed the President of Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court, Adly Mansour, as the new interim President, Saudi Arabia was the first Arab nation to offer its congratulations. King Abdullah congratulated the new interim president and praised the Egyptian military council's decision.<sup>16</sup> On 9 July, Saudi Arabia had already notified the new Egyptian leadership that they would provide an aid package of five billion U.S. dollars to boost the Egyptian economy.<sup>17</sup>

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On the one hand, all future Egyptian governments will be closely observed by Saudi Arabia regarding their position on Iran. On the other hand, the Saudi leadership is hoping for a conservative government in Egypt without excessively progressive plans for domestic and foreign policy reform. The only way future Egyptian leaders could return Egypt to its status as a trusted and predictable partner to the Saudi leadership is for them to clearly position themselves as a conservative, Arab and Sunni nation.

**Opportunities for and boundaries of Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement**

While former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak characterised Iran and its regional allies, Shia Lebanese Hezbollah and Sunni Palestinian Hamas, as a threat, Morsi's followers and supporters on the one hand have shown some degree of sympathy for Hezbollah and Hamas. In addition, no small number of Muslim Brotherhood supporters also seem to find inspiration from the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

16 | See "Saudi king congratulates Egypt's new interim president", *Al Arabiya*, 4 Jul 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/07/04/Saudi-king-congratulates-Egypt-new-interim-president.html> (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

17 | See "Saudi Arabia, UAE pledge \$8 billion to Egypt after coup", *PressTV*, 9 Jul 2013, <http://presstv.ir/detail/2013/07/09/313074/saudi-uae-to-shower-billions-on-egypt> (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

On the other hand, many Egyptians disapprove of a rapprochement with Iran on denominational and ideological grounds. Egyptian academics from Al-Azhar University and Salafist-oriented Egyptians have voiced scepticism and even enmity toward Iranian Shia Islam. In addition, Iran's support of the Syrian Al-Assad regime and the Iraqi Maliki government has enraged both Egyptian Islamists and secularists alike. The majority of Egyptians' feelings regarding Iran remain mixed. There is both a certain willingness to improve the relationship that has been frozen since 1979 and at the same time a widespread distrust of Shia Islam and its expansion in Egypt through Iran. Only approximately two per cent of Egyptians belong to the Shia faith. Nevertheless, a latent fear of Iranian Shia influence and proselytisation exists. Just how far this fear is ingrained was demonstrated by the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs when it imposed restrictions on Iranian tourists. Iranian tourists are barred from visiting many places in Egypt, including several Shia mosques. The inclusion of air traffic between Egypt and Iran that was announced in March 2013 and had been suspended for more than 30 years was suspended once again on the instruction of the Egyptian Minister for Tourism in April.

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Ousted President Morsi's "rapprochement" was very hesitant and should be seen as a signal to the West. In the process, Egypt was able to claim it was independent of Western interests and was thus able to improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis the various political camps.<sup>18</sup> However, Morsi's visit to the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Tehran in October 2012 – the first time an Egyptian president had visited Iran since 1979<sup>19</sup> – was more of an irritation for the Iranian hosts than a rapprochement with Tehran because of Morsi's clear position against the Syrian

18 | President Morsi would have been able to use a rapprochement with pro-Iranian powers to "buy back" conservative Gulf states to their side. This strategy did not seem so implausible given Egypt's long-time strategy of pitting the interests of the U.S. and the Soviet Union against each other during the Cold War.

19 | Iran had severed diplomatic ties with Egypt in 1979 after the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty.

Assad regime.<sup>20</sup> Egypt's diplomatic embassy in Tehran has been closed since 1979 and remains so to this day.

Though the Iranian leadership denounced the Egyptian military council's overthrow of President Morsi on 3 July, they had also criticised Morsi's leadership of the government. A spokesman for the Minister of Foreign Affairs denounced the Egyptian military's intervention and spoke of interference and support from foreign powers. At the same time, he viewed this latest development in Egypt not as a regression for the "Islamic awakening", but rather as consequence of Morsi's inefficient government action. Alaeddin Boroujerdi, Chairman for the parliamentary committee for national security and foreign policy, warned that a dangerous division and polarisation in Egyptian society held a similar conflict potential to that of Syria and Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

#### **DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENTS IN YEMEN AND BAHRAIN: IN THE SHADOW OF SAUDI AND IRANIAN CLAIMS OF SUPREMACY**

Yemen and particularly Bahrain once again came to the fore in 2011 as the setting for the Saudi-Iranian pursuit of supremacy. While Yemen was able to agree on a new, externally mediated leadership deal relatively quickly following the outbreak of the Arab protests, Bahrain's social unrest and denominational tensions continued.

The highest priority of Saudi Arabia's policy regarding Yemen was to put an end to the protests and riots in its neighbouring country as quickly as possible. Saudi Arabia has historically had a very close relationship with various Yemeni political and tribal actors. At the same time, the Saudi leadership has long accused Iran of sheltering Yemeni insurgents.

20 | President Morsi deliberately did not view his trip to Iran, which only lasted a few hours, as a state visit and consequently did not meet with the leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khamenei. He also avoided discussing taking up diplomatic relations with Iran.

21 | For more on Iran's official comments regarding Morsi's overthrow, see "Iran on Egypt: Range of Reactions", *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 10 Jul 2013, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/jul/10/iran-egypt-range-reactions> (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

In March 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council presented a plan for a peaceful transition of power in Yemen at the request of Saudi Arabia. In November 2011, then acting Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh signed an agreement to transfer power to Vice President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. In return, Saleh was granted amnesty. When social protests broke out in Bahrain in February 2011, the Saudi leadership attempted to dissociate the causes and the character of the protests from the other civil disturbances in the Arab world. The Bahraini and Sunni Arab leadership in the Gulf persistently presented a narrative of the "Bahraini exception", painting Bahrain as an "isolated" and "special case". According to this theory, the Bahraini protests were not a part of the Arab world's (legitimate) reform movements; rather they were a part of a sectarian movement with a religious agenda agitated by Iran. Both the Saudi regime and Saudi Islamists argued the theory that Iran was inciting Bahraini Shiites to fight the ruling house in order to promote religious divisions for its own interests. The social protests for political reform were portrayed as sectarianism, terrorism, national betrayal and Iranian interference. The Bahraini opposition was thus denied a place in the Arab world's protest and democratic movements. The Bahraini state had fuelled anti-Shia emotions among its 40 per cent Sunni population for years and had previously been able to successfully prevent cross-denominational opposition movements.

In March 2011, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates sent 2,000 soldiers to Bahrain at the request of the Bahraini leadership as part of the Gulf Cooperation Council's Peninsula Shield Force in order to protect Bahrain's royal family. The Bahraini royal family's retention of power forced by the military is a further element of Saudi Arabia's traditional status quo politics in the region.

Like the Saudi leadership, the Iranian regime also attempted to interpret the protests in Bahrain in a way to further their own interests. The Iranian leadership considered the protests to be a natural reaction to the illegal

Al-Khalifa regime. The Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, characterised the Bahraini protests as a legitimate call for human rights and civil liberties

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and viewed it as a continuation of the Iranian Revolution of 1979.<sup>22</sup> Iranian hard-liner and editor of the Iranian newspaper *Kayhan*, Hossein Shariatmadari, had already caused a furore in 2007 by stating that Bahrain was historically seen as an Iranian province. In doing so, he confirmed the fears of neighbouring Gulf states regarding Iran's claims to power in the region. Every allegation regarding Iranian influence on the conflict in Bahrain was denied by the Iranian leadership.<sup>23</sup>



Protests against Ali Abdullah Saleh in New York in May, 2011: In November 2011, the president signed an agreement to transfer power to Vice President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. | Source: André-Pierre du Plessis, flickr (CC BY).

### **SYRIA: FROM PLAYER TO PLAYING FIELD OF REGIONAL IDEAS OF ORDER**

With the unexpected outbreak of political protests in Syria and the Syrian regime's brutal actions against its own people, the Arab protest and democratic movements took a new and dramatic turn. In the meantime, through various types of foreign intervention, support of various groups and international mediation attempts, Syria has transformed

22 | See "Bahrain situation different had Iran interfered", Mehrnews.com, 26 Jan 2013, <http://old.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1800424> (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

23 | See "Bahrain rejects anti-Iranian claims on its media", Mehrnews.com, 25 Jan 2013, <http://old.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1799760> (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

itself from an important and capable player into a new regional political playing field. The Syrian crisis is in danger of becoming a protracted proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. To date, two blocs have stood in opposition to each other: the pro-Assad front with Iran, Russia, China, Lebanon and Iraq on one side and the anti-Assad camp with the U.S., Europe, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey as its main actors. Iran's support of various and even terrorist forces such as the brutal Shabiha militias or Saudi Arabia's tolerance of Salafist militant fighters may not be manageable in the long-term and may unleash unintended forces.

### **Saudi Arabia's Syria policy**

At first glance it appears contradictory that the Saudi leadership has placed itself on the side of the Syrian opposition and, in doing so, on the side of the democracy and freedom movements. However, for the Saudi leadership, the secular-Shia Assad regime, which was closely allied with Iran, has long been a regional source of irritation.<sup>24</sup> Even though Saudi Arabia has traditionally played the role of guarantor of the regional status quo and normally only interferes in order to ensure the continuance of the regional balance of power, the Saudi leadership positioned itself against the Assad regime relatively early. Together with Qatar, Saudi Arabia was the first Arab country to recall its ambassador from Damascus in mid-2011. Within the Arab League, Saudi Arabia and Qatar led the opposition to the Assad regime. Only Iraq and Lebanon's Hezbollah remain behind Assad. Saudi Arabia is an important supporter of the "Friends of Syria" group and, together with Qatar, is the main provider of financial and military assistance for the Syrian opposition. However, it is problematic that

**For the Saudi leadership, the secular-Shia Assad regime, which was closely allied with Iran, has long been a regional source of irritation.**

24 | Saudi-Syrian relations deteriorated considerably after the assassination of Saudi-Lebanese businessman Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, the planning of which the Syrian regime allegedly participated in. The relationship reached its lowest point after the 34-day war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006. In light of Hezbollah's successful opposition, President Bashar Al-Assad characterised the pro-Western Arab leaders as "half men" (*nisaf rijal*), a serious insult in tribally-shaped Arabic social classes. Even the state visits initiated between 2009 and 2010 could not bridge the ideological and personal divides between Saudi Arabia and Syria, though they did calm the tempers of both heads of state.

thousands of Sunni jihadists have remained in Syria and are pursuing their own objectives. While Qatar supports the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, much to the Saudi leadership's chagrin, Saudi Arabia seems to have aligned itself ideologically with the Salafist opposition in Syria. It would be in Saudi Arabia's interest to remove the secular-Shia Baath regime, to weaken Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah and to prevent the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood from taking power. However, lasting support of Salafist forces and those aligned with Al-Qaeda would be an incredibly dangerous strategy for the Saudi leadership to follow. Saudi jihadist militants in Afghanistan, supported by the Saudi leadership in the 1980s, later turned against the Saudi regime as radicalised repatriates.

### **Iran's Syria policy: strategic provisions for a post-Assad era?**

Iran's Syria policy is considerably more complicated and proactive. For Iran, the fate of their most important strategic alliance in the Arab world is tied to that of the Assad regime. The fall of the Assad regime would represent a severe loss of regional power for Iran. To that effect, the Iranian leadership is determined to back the Syrian regime by all available means.

Syria is a logistic hub for the Iranian Republic to exert influence on Lebanon and Palestine. The Assad regime has granted important access to its major ally, Iran, including to the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad

**Syria is an important element of Iran's deterrence strategy vis-à-vis possible military strikes by the U.S. and Israel. Both regimes also feature strong ideological similarities.**

and has provided logistic support for the movement of militants, weapons and money through Syrian territory. In addition, Syria is an important element of Iran's deterrence strategy vis-à-vis possible military strikes by the U.S. and Israel. Despite their seemingly conflicting ideological orientations, with a secular socialist Baath ideology on one side and a strict Islamic and Persian nationalist republic on the other, the Syrian and Iranian regimes also feature strong ideological similarities, amongst others an ideological enmity toward Israel and its American allies. That both regimes belong to the Shia religion in a broader sense plays no decisive role in their functional political alliance.

Since the Republic of Iran was founded over 30 years ago, the Syrian-Iranian alliance has proved a stable one. Former President Hafiz Al-Assad supported the young Iranian Republic during its eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s. In return, Iran supported the suppression of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's Sunni Islamic insurgencies in Hama in 1982. Countless bilateral accords in the industrial, military and energy policy sectors underpin Syrian-Iranian co-operation. In 2006, a Syrian-Iranian military accord was agreed upon in the form of a pact of mutual assistance.<sup>25</sup>

The Iranian leadership's goal in the current conflict is to keep the Assad regime in power for as long as possible. Ali Akbar Velayati, foreign affairs advisor to revolutionary leader Khamenei, described Syria as a "golden ring of opposition". Iran does not seem willing to give up this golden counterbalance.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, in January 2013, Velayati stated that every attack on Syria was an attack on Iran. At the same time, Iran is cognisant that the Assad regime will hardly endure in its current form. Thus Iran could aim to support an "Alawite rump state"<sup>27</sup> in Damascus and several other strategic regions, which would then perform these logistic functions for Iran in the future. In addition, the Iranian leadership is anxious to install allied groups and institutions in Syria that could outlast the Assad regime. In doing so, Iran is already looking ahead to a post-Assad era in order to guarantee extensive protection of its interests, even in a post-Assad regime.<sup>28</sup>

**Iran is cognisant that the Assad regime will hardly endure in its current form. Thus Iran could aim to support an "Alawite rump state" in Damascus.**

25 | For more on the 30-year-old Syrian-Iranian alliance see Jubin M. Goodarzi, "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment", in: *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Jan 2013, Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), 31-54, [http://orsam.org.tr/en/enUploads/Article/Files/201331\\_makale2.pdf](http://orsam.org.tr/en/enUploads/Article/Files/201331_makale2.pdf) (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

26 | See "West seeks to break resistance chain by targeting Syria", *PressTV*, 4 Sep 2012, <http://presstv.com/detail/2012/09/04/259810/west-targets-syria-to-stifle-resistance> (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

27 | See Will Fulton et al., *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, May 2013, Institute for the Study of War (ISW) / American Enterprise Institute (AEI). Fulton et al. consider the region around Damascus, Homs and parts of the coast as a possible Iranian sphere of influence in the future.

28 | By supporting various groups active in Syria, such as the paramilitary Shabiha militia or the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran is seeking to maintain a certain level of influence, even after the possible collapse of the Assad regime. At the same •

Iran has a presence in Syria through various military items and has offered Syrian security institutions training and guidance, as well as military equipment. At the same time, according to U.S. allegations, not only is the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' special unit on site, the Quds Brigade, a unit trained for foreign military actions, but so are the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' ground forces. The ground troops are technically responsible for Iranian domestic security and conventional operations. The presence of high-ranking commanders of the Iranian ground forces in Syria thus demonstrates a new dimension of Iranian intervention.<sup>29</sup> According to Syrian allegations, 48 members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards were apprehended by Syrian insurgents in August 2012.

**Iran views the Syrian opposition movement not as a part of the "Islamic awakening" in the region, but rather as an illegal movement manipulated by foreign forces.**

However, the Iranian leadership believes that, above all else, it is foreign powers in Syria that are fuelling the conflict by arming the insurgents. In contrast to the other

Arab protest movements, Iran views the Syrian opposition movement not as a part of the "Islamic awakening" in the region, but rather as an illegal movement manipulated by foreign forces. In light of the infiltration of countless external jihadist and Al-Qaeda-friendly forces in Syria, Iran has described the Assad regime's actions as a legitimate fight against terrorists and foreign destabilisation attempts. Iran argues that the causes of the Syrian crisis are interference and manipulation by international and regional forces that are using the current regional situation to topple the Assad regime.

Nevertheless, the Iranian leadership made a strategic calculation in warning the Syrian regime to temper their previous brutal and violent actions against the opposition forces. Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Akbar Salehi has insisted on entering into a dialogue with the "peaceful part" of the opposition. The Iranian leadership has also suggested that a new "transitional government" be formed by the Assad regime and the "peaceful opposition". In the process, Iran has continually stressed that only a domestic

time, the Shiite quarter of Damascus, Sayyeda Zeinab, is a strategic location for Iran to be able to further influence pro-Shia and pro-Iranian forces in Syria. See *ibid*.

29 | For more on Iran's military strategy in Syria see *ibid*.

Syrian solution, and not a solution implemented by a foreign military, should be undertaken.<sup>30</sup>

### **CONCLUSION: CONTINUATION OF TRADITIONAL STRATEGIES FOR SECURING REGIME CONTROL?**

After Iraq, Syria has now been thrown into the spotlight of a regional proxy war in which regional claims to power, competing ideological political models and revived and manipulated religious divisions have come to the fore. At the same time, this conflict is not only about the realignment of a purely physical balance of power in the region, but also about securing interpretative sovereignty over current events.

#### **Battle for interpretative sovereignty**

Just as the Arab population's protest movements, previously non-religious affairs purely directed at political freedom and social equality have now been utilised by advancing Islamic actors for themselves, the existing national regimes are also re-framing the protest and democracy movements to fit their own interests. As required, Iran describes the social movements either as an "Islamic" awakening inspired by the Iranian Revolution (Tunisia, Egypt) or as an insurgency manipulated by foreign actors (Syria). In the same manner, the Saudi leadership has characterised the protest movements either as illegitimate "disobedience" towards the ruling houses and a division in the Muslim community (protests in Saudi Arabia) or as Iranian Shia manipulation attempts (Bahrain). In the case of Egypt, the Saudi royal family initially stood by President Hosni Mubarak.<sup>31</sup> Only when the national uprisings became too popular and began to enjoy widespread support from the Arab people was the Egyptian revolution re-framed as "legitimate".<sup>32</sup>

30 | See "Iran Calls for Syrian Dialogue With Opposition", *The Iran Primer*, USIP, 7 May 2013, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/may/07/iran-calls-syrian-dialogue-opposition> (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

31 | At the end of January 2011, Saudi King Abdullah was continuing to express support for President Mubarak.

32 | While a vast majority of conservative Saudi Wahhabists are convinced that rebellion against unjust rulers itself is forbidden in Islam, Saudi Facebook and Twitter users almost all stood behind the Egyptian protests.

Yet the danger of an unintended backlash still stands with the national attempts to interpret the situation. Fuelling denominational fears in their own populations may prove counter-productive for social cohesion in the long-term and overlooks their citizens' real needs. Above all, the Saudi ruling family must confront the social challenges in its Shia-dominated Eastern Province.

The Arab Gulf states and Iran accuse one another of fuelling denominational divisions. Iran sees itself as the victim of an internationally fuelled "Shia phobia". An alleged Sunni-Shia dividing line contrasts with the Iranian leadership's claim of Islamic universalism. However, Iran's Syria policy has undermined its opportunity to play the part of a pan-Islamic role model for the Arab population. In the upheavals in the Arab world the people found their own voice and have no need of any state-controlled of a fair, Islamic political model. In contrast, the Arab rulers in the Gulf see Iran as a culprit who is attempting to incite their Shia population groups to rise up against their regimes. The level of fear among the national regimes of Iran's political and ideological influence on public opinion remains high.

**In the upheavals in the Arab world the people found their own voice and they have no need of any national interpretation of a fair, Islamic political model.**

### **National provisions**

Even before the start of the "Arab Spring", the Arab states have already understood that the real threat to their established regimes comes from the centre of their societies. However, despite massive upheaval in the Arab world, the Gulf states have held onto their traditional strategy for securing their leadership: increasing the welfare programme while simultaneously repressing extensive political demands. The Saudi royal family announced an increase in public expenditure for unemployment and a pay rise for the civil service amounting to approximately 170 billion U.S. dollars. The 15 per cent pay rise for Saudi state employees, who make up 80 per cent of the working population, would increase the culture of state dependence and undermine the state's privatisation strategy. The increasing unemployment rate due to population growth<sup>33</sup> and simultaneous high material demand, a society that is

33 | The official unemployment rate is ten per cent, but for Saudis between the ages of 20 and 24, the rate is 40 per cent.

increasingly younger and a free exchange of ideas through a flourishing internet culture that can scarcely be controlled any longer<sup>34</sup> have formed a dangerous political mixture for the Saudi regime.

In terms of regional politics too, the Gulf states have so far clung to their traditional strategies. The rather rhetorical prospect of membership for the conservative monarchies of Jordan and Morocco in the Gulf Cooperation Council, the increase in financial assistance to Bahrain, Oman, Jordan and Egypt<sup>35</sup> or the weapons imports agreed with the U.S. in 2011 demonstrate that there has been no considerable change in mentality by the political leadership. Just how long these traditional state responses to political and social challenges will suffice remains to be seen.

This article was completed on 22 June 2013.

34 | Saudi Arabia has the largest Twitter community in the MENA region and the second-largest Facebook community (in absolute figures) after Egypt. See Khaled El Ahmed, "Facebook Users in Arab Countries", Discover Digital Arabia, <http://ddarabia.com/infograph/facebook-users-in-arab-countries> (accessed 22 Jul 2013).

35 | Saudi Arabia and Qatar have pledged 2.4 billion U.S. dollars in aid to Jordan. The Gulf Cooperation Council nations had already provided Bahrain and Oman with 20 billion U.S. dollars in aid.