



Geo-Politics of the Middle East: Conflict and Cooperation

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As internal divisions and divided visions paralyze the United States' ability to dictate global order, we have witnessed a rise in regional conflicts based around competition for local dominance. This is most evident in the Middle East where, after years of playing regional referee, the United States is pursuing a less prominent role. The shift comes from a realignment of American priorities due in part to America's shale revolution which has put the United States on a path to energy independence, lessening the necessity of Middle Eastern oil imports. As the United States pivots its resources elsewhere, a power vacuum has been left in its wake. The contested place of regional hegemon in the Middle East has resulted in a series of proxy wars between two coalitions, one led by Saudi Arabia and the other, Iran. This article will analyze the Middle East through the strategies and incentives of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, followed by an overview of current proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. The article will then discuss what this means for the future of the region, and conclude with policy options for the United States.

Interests and Incentives

The American withdrawal from the Middle East comes as the United States recalibrates its diplomatic interests and priorities. The United States' role in the region was previously driven by the ne-

cessity of oil from Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia, and the special relationship the United States shared with Israel. However, these diplomatic partnerships have been declining for a series of reasons. A decade of massive military operations without concrete success has come at a cost: America's standing in the world, the national treasury, and a war-weary public opposed to interventionist strategy. Hopes for an indigenous Middle East liberalization died with the failure of the Arab Spring. These events premeditated Washington's changing calculus for bringing stability to the region. Rather than commit to a grand operation involving combat forces on the ground, the administration has favored the role of sponsoring proxy fighters while simultaneously working to consolidate and develop new strategic partnerships. The Obama Administration reached out to Iran in the form of the nuclear deal, with the intention of involving the rogue state in dialogue to help stabilize the region as well as forestall its development of nuclear weapons. However, in doing so Washington alienated its traditional allies in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Relations with Riyadh have also been disrupted by the changing dynamics of the oil relationship. Net imports for oil have sharply dropped in recent years, minimizing the market relationship between the two nations, while the US shale revolution is pushing America to outpace Saudi Arabia in crude production (Simon &

Stevenson, 2-10).

With political liberalization and oil imports becoming less important to U.S. concerns, America's stake in the Middle East is driven primarily by counterterrorism strategies and the containment of radical ideologies and jihadists. In downsizing its role in the Middle East, the United States has pushed a patchwork agenda to achieve short-term stability, without developing a comprehensive long-term plan. As part of this short-term strategy, the United States has gently nudged Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council towards greater independence and autonomy for solving their own conflicts while supporting them through strategic intelligence and

mined by a council of Shi'ite mullahs. In Saudi Arabia, the government's legitimacy is tied to its political alliance with Wahhabism, a sect of Sunni Islam. While the feud between these is due in part to sectarian ideologies, at the heart of the issues are geopolitical interests. Saudi Arabia's historical ties with the United States made it an enemy of the new Iranian theocracy.

Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are at an all-time high. Both nations are oil producers and have leveraged their natural resources for political ends. Saudi Arabia and Iran belong to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), a cartel in which Saudi Arabia is the de facto leader.

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arms deals (Goldenberg & Dalton, 59-66). With Iran, the United States has sought to deter the country from 'rogue state' actions through the nuclear deal, pulling Iran closer to the fold of liberal institutions, and limiting its ability to act unilaterally. Additionally, as part of the deal, Iran was removed from the U.S. list of government sponsors of terrorism, much to the chagrin of the Gulf States (Goldenberg & Dalton). By pursuing solutions independent of one another, the United States has indirectly facilitated greater insecurity and conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The modern dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran dates back to the Iranian Revolution in 1979 when the American-backed president, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, was ousted in favor of Shi'ite clergy. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have heavy theocratic elements woven into their government. In Iran, the legitimacy of the government is deter-

However, while they have worked together in the past when it is of mutual interest, their oil concerns have also been a point of tension. The current oil market is experiencing a severe glut due in part to the emergence of American shale oil, leading to low prices. However both nations have incentives for continuing to produce. It is the Saudis' hope that by flooding the market they can price out high cost producers such as the United States (Graeber). This policy of high production runs against the ambitions of Iran, which seeks economic gains through oil revenue. Iran has recently reentered the oil market after the lifting of economic sanctions as a compromise of the nuclear agreement. Keen to get its production back online after years of being frozen, Iran is unwilling to make a cut. Although a production cut would raise prices and thus help both nations, by acting only in self-interest the two have created a prisoner's dilemma in the modern oil market.

In addition to a battle for market share, the two countries are also waging proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq that further fuel and prolong conflicts in these countries. The rivalry was further enflamed this year when Saudi Arabia executed Nimr al-Nimr, a popular Shi'ite cleric known for his heavy criticism of Saudi Arabia's treatment of its Shi'ite minority. In response to this execution, protestors in Tehran set fire to the Saudi Embassy, heating up the cold war between the two nations. Following these events, Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic ties with Tehran, asking Iranian delegates to leave the country within 48 hours (Kennedy). These events have brought the rival nations to an incredibly strained point in the relationship, while the United States has failed to pacify this friction.

From the perspective of Saudi Arabia, the American withdrawal amounts to a level of betrayal (Goldenberg & Dalton, 63). With the United States as its ally, Saudi Arabia has enjoyed *de facto* dominance of the Gulf and a more secure position vis-à-vis Iran in the Middle East. However recent developments have complicated the Saudis' position and put them at odds with Washington. While offering security assurances in the form of intelligence and arms, Washington's negotiations with Iran have led Riyadh to question the West's commitment to their security. This, in addition to America's let-it-play-out response to the ouster of Mubarak in Egypt, has led Saudi Arabia to stake out their security through increasingly unilateral choices without the consent of the United States, financially supporting pro-Sunni militant cells in unstable environments (Goldenberg & Dalton, 60).

Saudi Arabia's strategy is driven by two types of security concerns: Internal and external. Internally, this involves containing unrest from the marginalized Shia minority and solidifying power after a series of shakeups in the line of succession to

the throne. Saudi Arabia's military has been predominantly trained not for waging a foreign war, but rather towards maintaining stability within the kingdom (Goldenberg & Dalton, 63). Externally, this strategy has been to shore up alliances with other Gulf nations and to align itself diplomatically and militarily against Iran. Iran, in gaining concessions to develop its own nuclear energy, has Saudi Arabia increasingly worried about the potential for an Iranian nuclear bomb. Despite the deal laying out details specifically to delay any break out capacity, Saudis have found themselves in a position where they see a necessity in combatting Iranian growth, economically and politically. The rebalancing of power, to the Saudis, is a zero-sum game and comes at the cost of Saudi interests and favors the Iranian theocracy. Furthermore, in the eyes of Riyadh, Iran is not simply an opportunist as many in Washington believe, but rather a primary contributor to conflict (Goldenberg & Dalton, 61).

Iran, in contrast, is experiencing a regional resurgence. With the nuclear deal removing sanctions and allowing Iran to rebuild its financial coffers as well as offering Iran a level of legitimacy in the international community it has not known since the revolution, Iran has several opportunities before it. In this regard, Iran's strategy can be defined by the objective of expanding its own sphere of political influence. Iran seeks to accomplish this through multiple means, namely providing funds, weapons, and support to fellow Shia institutions and militias as well as countering the objectives of Saudi Arabia and the United States within the region. This strategy has played out differently in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. While Washington and Tehran have historically experienced friction in their interactions, the nascent success of the nuclear deal demonstrates an openness on both sides to negotiation. Iran is pursuing its geopolitical objectives in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, at times working in coordination with the interests of

the United States and other times opposed.

Proxy Warfare

At the time of this writing, the three primary conflict zones in the Middle East—Syria, Iran, and Yemen—involve the role of sponsors and proxy fighters. Proxy warfare is defined as [a war] “in which states (or sponsors) aid and abet non-state proxies involved in a conflict against a common adversary” (Hughes). As discussed above, all three conflict realms in the Middle East threaten to be prolonged by the presence of foreign sponsors, predominantly Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.

There are essentially three notable objectives of proxy warfare: coercion, disruption, and transformation. (Hughes). In the context of proxy wars, coercion should be understood as a means of supporting an insurgent group to put pressure on the ruling body and coerce it into a certain course of action. The second objective, disruption, is a sponsorship of a foreign power motivated by the aim of weakening an enemy state or engaging its military forces as a means of depleting their resources. In the modern Middle East, Iran’s policy of support for Houthi rebels can be seen as a form of disruptive sponsorship, engaging Saudi Arabia via proxy and leveraging power to undermine the Saudis’ political and military will. The third form of proxy-warfare sponsorship is transformative, meaning that the objective of the sponsor state is to develop and arrange a political transition within the target state. Here, the United States and Saudi Arabia’s strategy within Syria can be seen as transformative, seeking to support rebel groups in the hopes of ousting Bashar al-Assad and his government.

While proxy wars may at times be considered an asset for sponsor states due to their relatively low level of resource investment, they are not without their consequences. As evidenced by the United

States in its support of the mujahedeen against Russia, supporting non-state actors carries the possibility of blow-back down the line. Additionally, there are consequences for the state in which the conflict is waged. In the case of Syria, outside sponsorship has had the effect of exacerbating factionalism amongst rebel groups, undermining the objective of the rebellion as a whole (Hughes). There is also the question of what the consequences may be of sending support to groups not properly vetted or of weapons falling into the arms of the ISIS.

Syria

A quick overview of the Syrian civil war is necessary to understand the roles that Iran and Saudi Arabia play. The conflict has its roots in the Arab Spring, in which the political unrest of the region spilled over into Syria’s borders. In response to protestors, the Alawite government of Bashar al-Assad began a violent crackdown. This violence in turn escalated the conflict into a country-wide civil war.

From the onset, Iran has sided with the Syrian government. Bashar al-Assad belongs to the Alawite religion, a subset of Shia Islam. The two nations also have historical ties stemming from a mutual interest in thwarting the objectives of the United States and Israel. Since the war began, Tehran has sent financial aid, military advisors, equipment, and arms (Goodarzi). Iran has made it clear in negotiations toward peace that they consider punitive action towards the Assad regime a nonstarter. Iran’s support for the regime also stems from its desire to counter the influence of radical Sunni groups such as ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which has exploited and thrived in the chaos of the war and the disorganization of rebel groups.

Saudi Arabia, by contrast, has sought to arm and fund rebel groups in the hopes of dismantling the Assad regime and undermining Iranian power.

Here, U.S. interests and Saudi ambitions diverge. (Simon & Stevenson). From the perspective of Saudis and in line with their grand strategy of mitigating Iranian influence, the greatest priority is bringing down the Alawite regime. As such, the Saudis have pushed for arming the rebel groups, equipping them with heavier artillery so they are better suited to fight. The United States, by contrast, has a legitimate fear of American weaponry falling into the hands of more extremist sects, and thus has been devoting more resources towards vetting the rebels in hopes of supporting only the more moderate groups. The United States' primary interest is in bringing regional stability, and thus from the perspective of the United States a negotiated settlement is a preferred outcome. As evidence of their willingness to compromise, while the United States has stated it is necessary that Bashar al-Assad step down, they

sectarian, the war has taken on a Shia/Sunni split since the involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran (BBC Yemen).

Saudi Arabia has for several years helped finance the government in the interest of preserving stability on its southern border. However, economic uncertainties and the Arab Spring movements have pumped fresh blood into the conflict. In 2014, Houthi rebels swept the capital of Sana'a, forcing the Saudi-backed president to flee the country and take refuge in the Sunni kingdom. Saudi Arabia sees the conflict as the fault of Iran, whom they believe to be a primary instigator in the war. The conflict has become a chief priority for the kingdom, especially since a series of raids by the rebels came dangerously close to the Saudi border. Saudi Arabia has led a coalition of air strikes against Houthi targets, using intensive military power in the hopes of

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have not pushed as heavily for punitive measures as Saudi Arabia. (Simon & Stevenson).

Yemen

Yemen, unlike many of its Gulf contemporaries, is an incredibly impoverished country and is marked by structural instability. The roots of the recent civil war trace back to a separatist movement by the Houthis, an ethnic group that adheres to a Shia sect known as Zaydism. The Houthis have made several pushes to break from the traditional Yemeni government, initiating violence in 2004 and opposing the regime since the 1990s. While not inherently

pushing back against the victories Houthis have had and undermining any future marginal gains. In this pursuit, Saudi Arabia has been using unrestrained military power. In particular, there have been accusations from Human Rights groups that the kingdom has been using cluster bombs in residential areas (Human Rights Watch).

From the perspective of the United States, intervention in Yemen is part of the larger American strategy of containing terrorist elements. The fractured state that Yemen has been in for the past two decades has allowed it to be a fertile breeding ground for terrorist groups, in particular Al-Qaida in the

Arab Peninsula (AQAP). The United States' involvement in the conflict has been through direct drone strikes on targets perceived to be a threat to American interests, and through the supply of weapons, logistical support, and intelligence to Saudi Arabia. To this end, it should be noted that despite American intentions, the fracturing of the Yemeni state by Saudi Arabia's actions, may be benefiting AQAP.

Although Saudi Arabia has defined Yemen's conflict in sectarian terms, this is not the complete truth of the matter. While the Houthis do belong under the greater umbrella of Shia Islam, their objectives are not based on religious beliefs and they show an openness to working with Sunni groups. Iran's involvement has simply been facilitating and exacerbating the conflict (Milani). Saudi Arabia has tried to frame Iran as one of the primary instigators of the war, but in truth Iran's interests are more opportunistic than anything else. At minimum, Iran has invested its soft power in the conflict, and arms as well, though this is in dispute (Milani). Iran has no direct economic or strong strategic purpose in Yemen; rather, in supplying the Houthis it is simply following the line of its grand strategy to promote its own sphere of influence and undermine that of Saudi Arabia and the United States (Milani).

Iraq

Since the American invasion in 2003, Iraq has been torn asunder. After the execution of Saddam Hussein and the ouster of his ministers and former government members, Iraq held democratic elections. In these elections, the long-suppressed majority of Shia Muslims voted in Shia leadership under al-Maliki. There is a perception amongst Iraqi Sunnis that the al-Maliki government engaged in systematic discrimination against their interests (Al-Qarawee). Despite U.S. attempts to steer the nation otherwise, many of the disenfranchised Sunnis went on to join

rebel insurgent groups and extremist factions, some of which developed into insurgent groups such as ISIS. Now Iraq is experiencing heavy warfare, with the Shia government, ISIS, and the Kurdish fighters vying for territorial control and caught in a web of conflict. Realizing its own responsibility in the factors that led to the present conflict, the United States is one of the nations most heavily invested in a stable Iraq. Even with ambitions of minimizing an American presence in the Middle East, the United States has sent military advisors as well as weapons, heavy armory, and other resources to the Iraqi government to help fight ISIS.

In the power vacuum initially left by the United States' withdrawal, Iran has eagerly sought to fill the void. With a neighboring border and strong cultural and religious ties, in the post-Saddam Hussein era Iran and Iraq made for natural allies, especially now that the government is Shia-led. Despite the competing interests of Iran and the United States, they share a common enemy in the form of ISIS. To cement its position of influence in Iraq, Iran has invested heavily in the country (Everett & Jameson). In particular, it has been working to develop a series of electric power plants in the Iraqi south. (Everett & Jameson). As is in line with its grand strategy, Tehran is using a soft power approach to pull Baghdad into the Iranian sphere of influence and weaken U.S. connections.

There are a series of possibilities as to how the situation could develop in the Middle East. The greatest emerging threat, in terms of U.S. interests, is that further instability in the region leads to the expansion of jihadist ideologies and a chaotic environment in which various groups can incubate and develop into insurgencies and terrorist organizations that threaten the security of the U.S. homeland. Studies have shown that civil wars with outside intervention tend to last longer (Regan). With that in mind,

there is the possibility that the wars in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq could continue on for some time. Al-Qaida has already developed a stronghold in Yemen, and ISIS has claimed territory in Iraq and Syria. In order to minimize the potential of these groups to grow, the United States must bring about an end to these conflicts and ensure that these nations do not become failed states. America has demonstrated a willingness to ally based on geopolitical strategic necessity, partnering with Shias in Iraq and Sunnis in Syria and Yemen. The question then is: What is the best means to bring about an end to these conflicts in the Middle East? Civil war termination is usually the result of a decisive military victory or a negotiated settlement. With that in mind, the United States should devise and implement a two-pronged comprehensive strategy, one in which short term stability is maintained, and one in which a pathway to long term security is assured.

Policy Recommendations

The best means for the United States to achieve these goals is to orchestrate a negotiated settlement between the principal financiers of the Sunni-Shia conflicts in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Additionally, given America's perceived bias, it will likely be necessary to involve Russia on behalf of Tehran to ensure all parties feel they have fair leverage. To end the series of proxy wars, a grand compromise must be established. In essence, this would require Iran foregoing its support for the Houthi rebels as well as recalling Revolutionary Guard Corps stationed in Syria in exchange for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states rescinding their support for the rebel groups as well. While both sets of rebel groups would likely protest this withdrawal of support and seek means to continue to fight without outside support, these provisions would quickly dry their resources and permit an environment for the government to take control in both Yemen and

Syria. In relinquishing support for rebellions, this would free up Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United States to direct their resources towards fighting ISIS, the only common enemy the three nations hold. The benefits of this scenario are that it would allow an end to much of the conflict that has been fomenting instability in the region. To ensure that this deal is followed through, the United States would likely need to supply significant financial support to Iran and Saudi Arabia. The lasting peace between Egypt and Israel gives credence to this possibility. In this scenario there would likely be strong opposition from Israel, rebel groups, and a segment of hardline members of each domestic population. The settlement would need to involve developing plans for Iraq, in particular how the nation can be salvaged after years of divisive war. Northern Kurds would likely press for an independent Kurdish state, which Iran would likely oppose. A solution to this could be an expansion of power for the autonomous governing entity, within the larger compilation of a unified Iraq. Russia will likely push for greater influence in Middle Eastern affairs, but like the United States, it derives greater benefit from a calmer Middle East and by taking the role of a negotiating party, it can display the achievement of the deal's success to leverage greater legitimacy as an international power broker. The end of the primary conflicts in the region promises the opportunity to lay down the foundations for a lasting peace.

Using this agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran as a platform, the United States may then try and oversee the establishment of a Middle Eastern institution, built with the intention of creating an atmosphere for dialogue and communication between all member countries. The creation of this liberal institution would also provide a venue for Middle Eastern nations to discuss their competing interests, establishing a groundwork that can allow the regional leaders to maintain control without the

omnipresent role of the United States. It is in the interest of Middle Eastern nations, even Israel and Saudi Arabia who have traditionally relied very heavily on U.S. support, to have America take a diminished role in the region. It is also in America's interest, so it may better leverage its short term strategies of counterterrorism with the grand strategy of maintaining political influence in the Asian sphere. While the idea of a firmly grounded international institution controlling the turbulent Middle East may strike some as an unrealistically optimistic outcome, when geopolitical interests align there lies potential. Traditional institutions of the region, such as OPEC, have demonstrated that coordination and

tractors. As an alternative, some would propose a different means of ensuring peace between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Following the Cold War logic of deterrence, some scholars have advocated for arming both Saudi Arabia and Iran with nuclear weapons. This proposition is in line with the ideology of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) and that as self-interested actors, neither nation would commit to war for fear of retaliation. While the role of nuclear weapons helped keep the United States and Russia from direct confrontation, it did little to prevent the series of proxy wars that defined the Cold War. Thus, there is little reason to believe nuclear armament would prevent Iran and

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efficacy are possible when incentives are properly laid out. The United States should work towards creating pathways and offering economic subsidies to see that these incentives are created for a multi-lateral institution. The greatest challenge in this endeavor is opening up diplomatic channels between Tehran and Riyadh while also ensuring that Israel participates. However, if the United States can leverage its political position, in conjunction with Moscow, toward this institution, it can be achieved. In creating this structure, member nations can discuss issues of oil and scarce resources, as well as conflict resolution, without committing to war.

Developing a sustainable institution in the Middle East is not without its obstacles and de-

Saudi Arabia from continuing to engage in supplying opposing rebel forces. Furthermore, Israel stakes much of its security on being the only nuclear power in the region. Arming two states that it regards as not simply competitors but threats to its survival would likely instigate Israel to play the role of spoiler. In the past, Israel has demonstrated its willingness to take preemptive strikes against neighboring nations it saw as a threat, and has threatened to do so in the future (Volsky). In addition to this, the United States should not encourage any actions that undermine the International Agreement on Nuclear Non-Proliferations Treaty. In the case of a nuclear Middle East, it would take only one instance of a state jumping the gun to trigger global cataclysmic events.

Conclusion

The current instability in the Middle East stems from a series of proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, propelled and exacerbated by the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Recent events, such as the execution of Nimr al-Nimr, have created further ruptures in the relationship between Tehran and Riyadh. While the United States' strategic interests in the region have narrowed due to the development of shale oil, facilitating a lesser need for Middle Eastern oil, the United States is still a major stakeholder in the region; these interests come from its commitments in Iraq and Israel as well as quelling the potential of terrorist groups and insurgencies set on attacking the homeland. It is imperative for the United States to create a comprehensive grand strategy for bringing stability to the Middle East. In the short term, this requires orchestrating a negotiated settlement to end the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, while focusing resources on eliminating the threat of ISIS. This negotiated settlement must involve all the relevant actors in the region, and developing compromises between the major parties to establish ceasefires and peace. This negotiated settlement should focus on several objectives: Reducing the relationship between sponsor-state and proxy fighters, engaging structural reforms to domestic governmental institutions, and the establishment of peace and reconciliation councils to reduce post-war conflict and tensions between rival sectarian groups. All parties should agree to respect the sovereignty of the former conflict states, and withdraw support from proxy fighter groups. To ensure that this peace holds, the United States should dedicate financial resources to developing a multilateral institution in the region, in which Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran have places at the table. The design of this institution could be mirrored to that of the United Nations, including that of the role of a security council

staffed by Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia as permanent members with veto powers. This institution should also function and highlight the potential for economic growth within cooperation as a means of attracting support from party groups. In practical terms, to bring this institution into being, the United States must pledge foreign aid comparable to what it donates to Israel, Palestine, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. To help bring parties into agreement on the development of the Middle Eastern Institution, the United State should leverage all of its geo-political capabilities, including the threat to withdraw support for Middle Eastern nations that refuse. While the realities of a complex conflict environment make such an institution unlikely, an institution of this magnitude would enable dialogue without the necessity of war, and help mitigate current and future conflict.



Photo: Stevin Azo Michels, Kyoto, 2016