



المنتدى الاستراتيجي العربي
ARAB STRATEGY FORUM



The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington
Building bridges of understanding



**FIVE KEY
EVENTS IN
THE PAST
FIVE YEARS
THAT ARE
RESHAPING
ARAB
REALITIES**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During this period of flux and transition, the Arab world is being reshaped by numerous internal and external factors, some of which may not yet be fully comprehended. However, five central questions have risen to the fore in the past five years that are now having, and will likely continue to exert, a powerful impact on Arab politics and societies.

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First, the crisis of political Islam, and the nature and role of Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, will be central in shaping the parameters of mainstream Arab political culture in the coming decades. Will politicized religion and religiously inflected politics remain a powerful and transnational ideological force in Arab societies, or can patriotism and inclusive social consciousness prevail as the dominant values?

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Second, while the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant has been defeated on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria, the struggle against violent radicalism now shifts to the deeper level. The challenge of eradicating terrorism as a major threat must now be addressed at a more fundamental level, tackling the root causes of fanaticism and defeating violent extremism and eliminating its appeal to disenfranchised, disaffected, or disempowered youths.

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Third, numerous Arab societies are now beset by the rise of nonstate actors, many of them pro-Iranian sectarian militias, that are undermining state sovereignty and disrupting or usurping the national authority that properly belongs to central governments. They both feed off of and promote state failure in the Arab world and sectarian tensions between Shia Arab communities and their Sunni Arab compatriots. This is therefore both an internal and external threat to the Arab world and one of the most serious challenges that has emerged in recent years.

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Fourth and finally, another internal threat is represented by the disputes that led to the boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt. Both the boycott and its underlying causes reveal serious fissures in the first and, to date, most successful Arab coalition, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and allow non-Arab powers, notably Turkey, to benefit at the expense of Arab interests.

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The fifth and final factor is the sweeping set of social and economic reforms underway in Saudi Arabia, that are so thoroughgoing that they could be said to constitute the development of a Fourth Saudi state. This top-down, managed transformation will have profound implications not only for Saudi society and the rest of the Gulf region, but for the Arab world in general, both because of the tremendous influence and leadership Riyadh exercises and because this represents a potential alternative to the chaotic and uncontrolled changes of the «Arab spring» uprisings.

By analyzing these five critical emerging factors both individually and in their broader context and in relation to each other, this report attempts to track some of the main trends that will play a major role in determining the political, strategic, social and economic landscape of the Arab world in the coming decades.

INTRODUCTION

This report examines five key developments that have emerged over the past five years that are most obviously and profoundly shaping the political and strategic landscape of the Arab world.

They involve different but essential elements of political culture and ideology, socioeconomic forces, the role of minorities and majorities, relations between the rulers and the ruled, extremist threats, contests for power and influence, and relations with key non-Arab actors. Each of these issues, in its own way, raises the essential question of what the Arab world will look like in the coming decades.

The crisis of political Islam – specifically, the crisis facing Muslim Brotherhood-oriented groups – will largely determine the boundaries of mainstream Arab political culture in the future. Can Islamist groups like the Brotherhood be considered legitimate Arab political players? Are they part of the problem, or part of the solution, to the menace of terrorism and extremism? Is there a way for such groups to evolve into a post-Islamist identity without being conspiratorial, revolutionary, or transnational, that others will find tolerable? How can constructive national and social consciousness triumph over sectarian passions and radical religious ideologies?

The rise and fall of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS) raises the question of the future of terrorism and violent extremism that has been plaguing the Arab world in recent years. Is the downfall of ISIL the harbinger of a diminished threat of violent radicalism? How can the fundamental causes of terrorism be addressed so that the menace of violent extremism is practically eliminated?

Pro-Iranian nonstate actors, even more than self-described “jihadists,” pose an immediate, and in some cases existential, threat to the integrity and functionality of several significant Arab countries, and to the Westphalian nation-state system as a whole. Can countries like Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen regain their sovereignty? Can the spread of Iranian hegemony through the use of proxies be halted or reversed? What impact will the rise of such groups have on relations between Shia Arab communities and their Sunni Arab compatriots? Is the region doomed to sectarian strife or can divided Arab societies begin to heal themselves?

The Saudi, Emirati, Bahraini, and Egyptian boycott of Qatar has called into question the viability and future of the most successful Arab regional organization: the Gulf Cooperation Council. By demonstrating profound and persistent divisions among Gulf Arab countries, does it open new opportunities for Iran or undermine relations with the United States? Must Qatar’s neighbors act decisively to end Doha’s support for individuals and groups that undermine broader Arab interests? What is the likely outcome of this standoff? And what is the future of Gulf Arab relations and what will their impact be on the role of other regional powers like Turkey?

Finally, the sweeping and highly ambitious economic and social transformation in Saudi Arabia may be creating a fourth Saudi state. What obstacles are Saudi’s likely to face? What are the political dimensions to the economic and social changes thus far, and what additional challenges remain? What is the regional significance of Saudi Arabia’s effort at comprehensive renovation; where does it fit into recent regional experiences (especially the “Arab Spring” uprisings).

These key developments, and the implications that this report endeavors to track, can and should help us anticipate major trends that will shape, and challenges that will confront, the Arab world in the future. Imponderable factors and unexpected developments are a given. But we can better prepare, individually and collectively, for what’s likely to transpire by thinking through those trends we can already identify. This report is intended to advance that vital conversation.

THE CRISIS OF POLITICAL ISLAM

One of the most significant consequences of the Arab Spring has been the brief rise, sudden fall, and ongoing crisis of the Islamist movements associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. As a succession of entrenched strongmen fell from power, many commentators assumed that Brotherhood parties would be swept into office and define the emerging Arab political mainstream of the early 21st century. That was not the case and, instead, Islamist movements now find themselves in a period of unprecedented turmoil.

This misplaced expectation arose from a series of assumptions shared by many observers, inside and outside the Arab world. First, it was wrongly assumed by many people, including numerous Islamists themselves, that because most Arab citizens are devout Muslims, they would be easily transformed into supporters of «political Islam» when and if the general public enjoyed a period of popular consultation and empowerment. Second, observers noted that in many of the Arab republics in question, Brotherhood parties were uniquely well situated to take advantage of post Arab Spring tumult. In many cases they alone had long histories, a well-established political brand and identity, extensive, on-the-ground organizations, and a fully developed ideology that they could either run on or govern with, or both.

The second observation was correct. Most notably in Tunisia and Egypt, Islamist parties were the primary beneficiaries of the initial post-uprising elections. They faced opposition parties that were either stigmatized with alleged connections to the discredited former regimes or were newly formed and disunited. There were no other

comparable groups sharing their structural advantages, and the results predictably reflected that asymmetry. In Tunisia, the Islamist Ennahda party dominated the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, winning 37.04 percent of the vote and 89 seats, compared to 8.71 percent and 29 seats for its nearest rivals¹. In Egypt’s 2011-12 parliamentary election, the Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party alliance won 37.5 percent of the vote and 235 seats, followed by a Salafist bloc that got 27.8 percent and 121 seats, with the largest nonreligious party gaining only 9.2 percent of the vote and 41 seats².

However, these initial trends did not build upon themselves, nor culminate in the «green wave» of Islamist control that many observers had expected. Almost immediately, Islamist parties began to falter and lose popularity. In Tunisia, the Ennahda-led coalition struggled on multiple fronts. In Egypt, Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi narrowly defeated former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq³. And in countries gripped by post-uprising conflict such as Libya and Syria, Brotherhood parties were increasingly eclipsed by various nationalist or more extreme Islamist opposition militias.

By 2013, rather than cresting atop a wave of power, Arab Islamists rapidly sank into a crisis in which they continue to flounder. The turning point was in Egypt in 2013. Dissatisfaction mounted after Morsi accorded himself virtually dictatorial rights to bypass the judiciary and appeared to be preparing to purge the state bureaucracy and pack it with Brotherhood supporters. A series of massive street protests in late June culminated in the military ouster of Morsi’s government, which was followed by a major crackdown against the organization and its cadres, with the apparent support of much of the Egyptian political spectrum and general population. The Morsi overthrow was the unmistakable writing on the wall for Islamist groups

across the region. Arab publics may have been willing to give Islamists a chance in the immediate post-uprising context, but in Egypt and elsewhere they appeared to reinforce, if not confirm, the deepest suspicions others had about their long-term intentions. For these Islamist groups, the crisis had probably really begun when the old regimes fell, because all they had known for many decades was a life and agenda defined entirely by their role in opposition. They had been established for that, and they had become comfortable and effective in that role. Emerging from the shadows into the public eye and, more challenging still, being asked to govern, proved an eventuality for which they were not prepared, contrary to what they and many others believed.

These organizations, particularly the Brotherhood in Egypt, were hampered by a disconnect between their own self-perceptions and depictions and the unshakable realities of who they actually were. While they were among the biggest early beneficiaries of the uprisings, and presented themselves as the core of the «revolutions» and “champions of democracy,” in fact – as the publics were well aware – these organizations did not initiate or lead the popular uprisings that overthrew the old regimes. Once the rebellions were well underway, they certainly joined the party, but they did not embody the hopes and dreams of the people before, during, or after the revolutions.

The Islamist movements have also benefited tremendously from gaps in governance and social services in many Arab states. Merging their religious orientation with a revolutionary, and almost Leninist, political ethos, Islamist movements from the outset emphasized social work and the provision of services in fields such as health and education in order to gain credibility with, and leverage over, populations in need. The use of these social programs in North Africa, Egypt, and Gaza, in particular, for political purposes has been part of a long-term strategic program for the Islamist groups.

They have helped promote the organizations as caring, and indeed indispensable, for impoverished or needy constituencies, and fostered a culture of dependency. It has also given radicals a captive audience from a young age for their propaganda and a platform for promoting and institutionalizing the slogan «Islam is the answer.»

However, despite these advantages, Brotherhood parties generally shared a number of features that were characteristic of the movement from the founding of the earliest Muslim Brotherhood organization in Egypt in the late 1920s, which significantly undermined their chances of widespread popularity and political effectiveness following the uprisings. In almost all cases, these groups were conspiratorial, revolutionary, and transnational. Their conspiratorial or clandestine structures meant that, even as they competed in now supposedly open political systems, much of their decision making and even finances and organizational structures were effectively underground and secret. Their revolutionary character served them well in their role as part of the permanent opposition but less so when they were presented with the opportunity to take power. That these groups retained their conspiratorial and revolutionary orientations into the new political era seemed to confirm the worst suspicions of their critics and a skeptical broader public.

Deep-seated mistrust of these supposedly «moderate» Islamist groups is also driven by strong ideological and political affinities they share with more violent and extreme Islamist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIL. Muslim Brotherhood ideology, in both its more traditional and radicalized «Qutbist» versions, shares a number of key assumptions with the more extreme movements. They agree about many central issues regarding the nature of Islamic theology and practice. In particular, they all insist on a singular legitimate answer to most, if not all, legal and doctrinal questions, and categorically reject the multiplicity of different legitimate schools of thought inherent to traditional Islamic jurisprudence. They hold many similar views on the proper role of Islam in all aspects of Muslim societies. All endorse the goal of the eventual establish-

ment of a pan-Islamic caliphate. And Muslim Brothers share a great deal of common language, assumptions, and long-term ambitions with the more extreme groups.

Moreover, the Brotherhood agenda tends to undermine national identities and priorities, placing the Islamic affiliation above and beyond a primary identification with the homeland. And its fundamental intolerance threatens what in many cases are traditionally multicultural, multidemocratic, and multiethnic Arab societies, and particularly menaces the rights and roles of various minority groups and women. Hence skepticism about the Muslim Brotherhood is far more widespread than is often recognized, and numerous Arab constituencies view such groups with deep suspicion, based on many decades of experience.

But perhaps the biggest drawback of the traditional Muslim Brotherhood agenda in the quest for majority public support in contemporary Arab societies is its transnational quality. Belonging to a regional movement, however loosely affiliated, raises the specter that these groups and activists place a broader political agenda above the particular national interest of their own country. It often comes across as prima facie evidence of insufficient patriotism at best and downright disloyalty at worst. Those who had expected Islamists to easily sweep into power in Arab republics following the popular revolts had an exaggerated sense of the appeal of a narrowly politicized version of religion and completely discounted the ongoing primacy of flag and country.

Building on a number of existing trends, several of the key Brotherhood parties have evolved, particularly since 2013, into supposedly post-Islamist groups that claim to renounce the traditional conspiratorial, revolutionary, and transnational aspects of their organizational identities. This was clearly a response to the collapse of the Morsi regime in Egypt, and the realization that sticking with that established Islamist approach would be a recipe for disaster elsewhere. Some argue that this trend among Ennahda in Tunisia, the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, the largest Muslim Brotherhood group in Jordan,

and others provides a potential way forward. Such organizations are promising to play by the rules and obey the laws of their own countries. They no longer view themselves as revolutionary movements that seek to replace the existing system with a theocratic order of their own liking. They claim to simply want to compete openly with others for votes and public support within the existing constitutional order. Finally, they are downplaying, if not eliminating, a transnational orientation, and insisting that they are only interested in promoting Islamic virtues and other conservative values within – and according to the laws of – their own societies.

Yet after a hundred years of transnationalism, conspiratorial plotting, and revolutionary agitation and violence, opponents of the Islamists and much of the Arab public remain highly skeptical of their intentions. There are ample grounds to question their long-term intentions and to suspect that these transformations are fundamentally strategic rather than committed and sincere. Many of the senior leaders of these groups have spent a lifetime of revolutionary and reactionary campaigning and they may not have really altered their outlook but rather adjusted their pronouncements in the interests of political viability and survival. Crucially, there is no example of any Islamist party that, upon coming to power, has not sought to establish a theological dictatorship or an Islamist-led government or society, with disastrous consequences. There is therefore every reason to continue to categorically reject the politicization of Islam and the Islamization of politics in the Arab world.

Many leading voices in the Arab world continue to stress the need for political orientations that emphasize social and national consciousness over the weaponization of religious and sectarian sentiments. Some Gulf countries, including the United Arab Emirates, demonstrate the potential for an Arab society that is multireligious, culturally and ethnically diverse, and religiously and socially tolerant, as well as well-functioning and prosperous. The largely diverse and traditionally tolerant societies of the Arab world are far better suited to a model based on citizenship and inclusive participation in the national project than a narrow vision of sectarian identity and religious dogmatism. And the emphasis on secular and national politics rather than religious extremism is forward, rather than backward, looking. It is open to embracing the outside world and successfully joining and competing in the globalizing international economy and society rather than walling the Arab world off behind a barricade of obscurantist and paranoid dogma.

THE RISE AND FALL OF ISIL

The struggle against some of the most vicious forms of weaponized religious extremism in the past five years has focused on combating the alarming rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. ISIL is one of numerous iterations of the “jihadist” or “takfiri” militant orientation that emerged in the aftermath of the 1979-89 war against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Its ideological roots lie in the tenets of the Muslim Brotherhood and the blending of that revolutionary ethos with religious social ultraconservatism that came together in the 1970s and 80s. These extremist orientations fused with other influences on the battlefields in Afghanistan and ultimately gave rise to the al-Qaeda organization in the 1990s. In the aftermath of the overthrow of the Taliban following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, al-Qaeda appeared moribund.

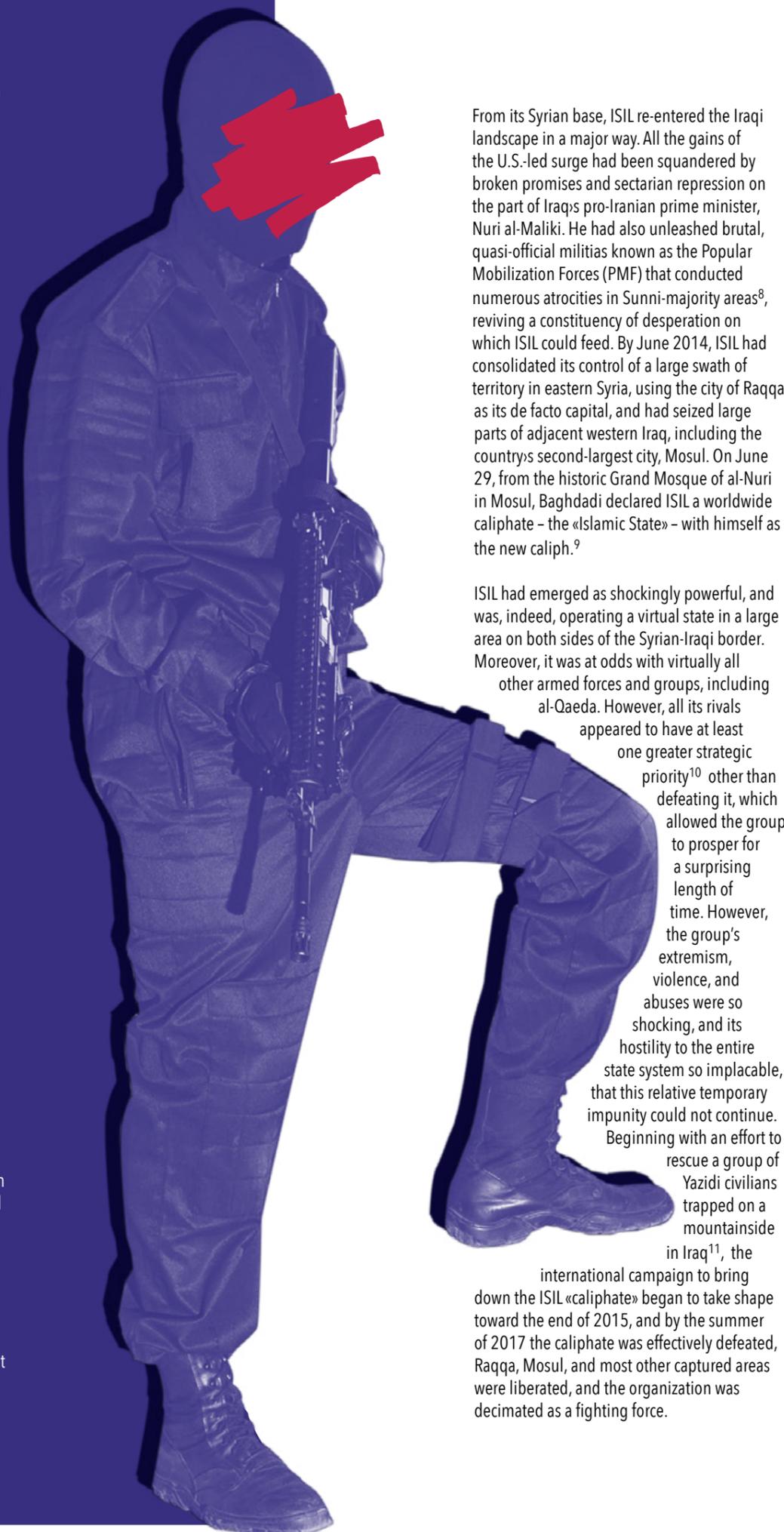
However, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq breathed new life into al-Qaeda and the jihadist movement more generally. ISIL emerged⁴ from the Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad group in Iraq that was led by the notorious Abu Musab al-Zarqawi⁵. The group was founded in 1999 but remained quite marginal until the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. The organization then grew rapidly, pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2004 and rebranding itself as Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. In 2006, the group once again renamed itself, this time the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), but lost considerable power and territory during the U.S.-led surge and «awakening» in Sunni-majority areas of western Iraq in 2007-08. Once again, the key jihadist organization appeared to be on the brink of oblivion.

Another conflict, however, emerged to again revive the group's fortunes. Though it was showing renewed signs of life in Iraq through suicide bombing attacks in 2010, the war in Syria offered the group a new *raison d'être*,

battleground, and recruiting and fundraising platform. In the context of the Syrian conflict, existing tensions that emerged in Iraq between al-Qaeda and ISI became pronounced. The two fought over control of their joint jihadist franchise in the Syrian conflict, Jabhat al-Nusra, which became increasingly important within the Syrian opposition as the war against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad intensified. In April 2013, ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi claimed control of Jabhat al-Nusra, only to be repudiated by the Syrian organization's leader, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, who reiterated his personal and organizational allegiance to al-Qaeda⁶. Baghdadi also announced that ISI was merging with Jabhat al-Nusra to form a new group: ISIL. Much back and forth ensued, and the factions fought politically and militarily. By the end of 2013 it was clear that Jabhat al-Nusra was remaining part of al-Qaeda, and that ISIL was a new and independent organization hostile to both⁷.

ISIL had significant differences with al-Qaeda ideologically and programmatically. Ideologically, ISIL was more literalist and millenarian than al-Qaeda tended to be, with a particular emphasis on prophecies and a commitment to living in the “end of days.” A concomitant programmatic difference was ISIL's emphasis on the creation of an «Islamic State» as the immediate goal of its struggle, whereas for al-Qaeda this remained a more distant goal. This meant, in effect, that ISIL's agenda constituted a repudiation of Osama bin Laden's dictum from the 1990s, which was effectively the foundational principle of al-Qaeda, to focus on the «far enemy» (the United States and the rest of the West) first in order to prepare for eventual victories over the «near enemy» (Arab and Muslim governments and societies). Both of these orientations also led ISIL, beginning when it was ISI, to be even more fanatical, locally violent, and hostile to all others (especially moderate Arab Muslims, Shias, other Islamists, and virtually anyone not a member of the organization, eventually including their rivals in al-Qaeda) than any previous large jihadist group.

Against the backdrop of exceptional brutality on the part of the Assad regime and its Iranian and Hezbollah allies, ISIL thrived in the Syrian conflict. But while all other opposition groups focused on overthrowing Assad, ISIL concentrated instead on establishing its own rule in areas it controlled. This led to de facto cooperation between ISIL and the Assad regime, so that the regime left the group largely unmolested, treating it almost as a distant rival rather than an immediate and existential threat. The extremism of the group may even have prompted the regime to see it as a short-term strategic asset.



From its Syrian base, ISIL re-entered the Iraqi landscape in a major way. All the gains of the U.S.-led surge had been squandered by broken promises and sectarian repression on the part of Iraq's pro-Iranian prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki. He had also unleashed brutal, quasi-official militias known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) that conducted numerous atrocities in Sunni-majority areas⁸, reviving a constituency of desperation on which ISIL could feed. By June 2014, ISIL had consolidated its control of a large swath of territory in eastern Syria, using the city of Raqqa as its de facto capital, and had seized large parts of adjacent western Iraq, including the country's second-largest city, Mosul. On June 29, from the historic Grand Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul, Baghdadi declared ISIL a worldwide caliphate – the «Islamic State» – with himself as the new caliph.⁹

ISIL had emerged as shockingly powerful, and was, indeed, operating a virtual state in a large area on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border. Moreover, it was at odds with virtually all other armed forces and groups, including al-Qaeda. However, all its rivals appeared to have at least one greater strategic priority¹⁰ other than defeating it, which allowed the group to prosper for a surprising length of time. However, the group's extremism, violence, and abuses were so shocking, and its hostility to the entire state system so implacable, that this relative temporary impunity could not continue. Beginning with an effort to rescue a group of Yazidi civilians trapped on a mountainside in Iraq¹¹, the international campaign to bring down the ISIL «caliphate» began to take shape toward the end of 2015, and by the summer of 2017 the caliphate was effectively defeated, Raqqa, Mosul, and most other captured areas were liberated, and the organization was decimated as a fighting force.

However, while virtually everyone welcomes the downfall of ISIL, there is good reason to fear that although this battle has been won, the larger war against extremism continues, and it is an uphill struggle. Beginning in some of the first Sunni-majority cities in Iraq to be liberated from ISIL, such as Tikrit and Falluja¹², a disturbing pattern emerged¹³. ISIL fighters were killed or fled, and the organization apparently disappeared from those areas. However, in relatively short order ISIL remnants began to steadily and quietly re-emerge in these towns and cities as insurgents. The same pattern may be developing in Mosul and other parts of liberated Iraq, even as ISIL militants continue to put up a fight in some strategically significant areas of eastern Syria near the border with Iraq.

Several key factors conspire to prevent ISIL from being decisively defeated and eliminated. The ongoing vulnerability and marginalization of numerous communities in Shia-dominated Iraq and Alawite-dominated Syria, and particularly violence by Iraqi PMF groups or Syrian Shabiha or other pro-Assad forces, still allow ISIL to make the case that it remains the last hope of desperate constituencies. The lack of sufficient and coordinated reconstruction efforts and international aid provide further grounds for such a resurgence. Moreover, the broader underlying grievances that gave rise to ISIL in the first place, particularly as a regional phenomenon, are largely unresolved. These include state and social dysfunctionality, economic desperation, and a lack of meaningful collective narratives, which jihadist ideology purports to supply, giving adherents a supposed reason to live and die.

Therefore, even if ISIL were to effectively disappear, as many other extremist groups in the past have, there is no reason to believe that the terrorist threat is vanishing or even dissipating. Indeed, the rise and fall of ISIL in the past five years suggests, to the contrary, the alarming continued vitality of such extremism and, indeed, its tendency to become more extreme. There does appear to be an intensifying level of fanaticism and adherence to violence on the part of such extremists, as new groups compete to outdo each other in fanaticism. Moreover, the continuation of conflicts and state dysfunctionality in significant parts of the Arab world provide the social tumult and lack of governance that allow such organizations to gain followers, enticed by their promise to bring order in the midst of chaos. ISIL has lost its caliphate, but it has not been eliminated or even defeated as an organization

and, especially, as an idea. It continues to function not only in Syria and Iraq, but in Libya, Yemen, Sinai, and many other parts of the Arab world where conflict rages and no government's writ can run. After more than 20 years of existence, al-Qaeda remains a potent force in many of these areas, and appears to have shifted its epicenter from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region to Idlib province in northern Syria¹⁴. The UAE, with the help of U.S. and other forces, is waging a counterinsurgency against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, and there are other locations where al-Qaeda and/or ISIL continue to operate and, in some cases, prosper.

The past five years suggest that if the war against extremism has not yet been won, it also has not been lost. The battle on the ground must now be augmented by a major effort to confront the belief systems informing terrorism. The jihadist ideology, in its various iterations, remains powerful, and is likely to persist as long as there is a dearth of other, more appealing narratives to capture the imagination of the desperate, enraged, and isolated. But the ability of such groups to pose a real threat to Arab states and the established order appears to depend largely on the proliferation of conflict and the inability of governments to control their territory effectively and with legitimacy. The Arab world appears to be calming somewhat from the tumult that developed from the 2010-11 uprisings and other factors. However, the deeper political malaise that has created a profound crisis of effective governance, popular legitimacy, and social and national consciousness in much of the Arab world, particularly the republics, remains largely untreated.

The causes of the rise of jihadist extremism in recent decades are overdetermined, and, for that very reason, can and should be contested among scholars and analysts. However, virtually any list of reasons for the rise and persistence of such extremism consists of factors that remain operational in many Arab societies, particularly a range of communal grievances and vulnerabilities. Under such circumstances, even a period of relative calm will not signal the death of this ideology and the end of the threat. And given that this calm is inconclusive and may be tenuous, and numerous conflicts either persist or can reignite, jihadist extremism will almost certainly remain a profound menace into the foreseeable future.

PRO-IRANIAN NONSTATE ACTORS

In addition to the jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIL, a different set of extremist nonstate actors menaces the contemporary Middle East: pro-Iranian militias. The prototype for such groups is Hezbollah, established under Iranian guidance following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. For the subsequent 20 years, Iran, and its allies, in various Arab countries made numerous attempts to replicate the enormous success it had in establishing Hezbollah as an Iranian proxy. It is hard to overstate its value as a strategic Iranian asset deep in the heart of the Arab world and along Israel's border, especially since Hezbollah eventually established an effective state-within-a-state zone of control in Lebanon.

However, none of these efforts were fully successful until the events in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. The downfall of the Taliban in Afghanistan and, especially, the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, led to a massive expansion of Iran's regional influence and strategic reach. As Iran's power and effectiveness within the Arab world has intensified since the Arab Spring uprisings, the scope of Iran's reliance on nonstate proxies and armed extremist groups has grown. Now, numerous Arab states and societies are beset and undermined by these powerful pro-Iranian militias that are largely, although not exclusively, under the direct control of Tehran.

As it has been since the early 1980s, the jewel in the crown of Iranian hegemony in the Arab world is Hezbollah. However, over time and particularly during the Syrian conflict, the role of Hezbollah has greatly evolved. The organization was founded under the direct influence and with the training and guidance of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It was initially intended to combat Israel and the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, and to offset the influence of the Israeli-controlled South Lebanon Army mercenary group. Hezbollah presented itself as both a communal Shia defense force and the national Lebanese resistance against Israeli invasion and occupation. The organization was, therefore, able to garner considerable support throughout Lebanese society for its battle against Israel, at least until Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000.

Hezbollah had long maintained that its arms were strictly for «resistance» against Israel, and was the only militia not to be disarmed through the 1989 Taif Accord, which ended the Lebanese Civil War¹⁵. However, Hezbollah carried out various major attacks aimed at non-Israeli targets including numerous bombing attacks in Lebanon and other countries, and the seizing of Western hostages. Four Hezbollah operatives have been indicted by the U.N. Special Tribunal for Lebanon in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005¹⁶ and they are being tried in absentia in The Hague for the killing¹⁷.

Moreover, during a May 2008 internal Lebanese dispute, Hezbollah seized large parts of Beirut and other areas outside its normal range of operations in a confrontation with the Lebanese state over its private telecommunications network and other aspects of sovereign authority it was exercising in defiance of the national government¹⁸. At that point, it became undeniable that Lebanon had, within its

territory, a large and well-armed militia controlled by a foreign power (Iran) that maintained its own foreign and defense policies and was willing and able to usurp whatever aspects of state sovereignty it deemed necessary entirely independent of any Israeli invasion or occupation.

In the context of the Syrian conflict, however, in which Hezbollah has been a major player¹⁹ in the joint Russian-Iranian project to rescue and restore the Assad dictatorship, the nature of the organization has strikingly evolved. Hezbollah is now no longer primarily a Lebanese phenomenon, since much of its most important activities take place in Syria and beyond. The organization has lost at least 1,500 of its most elite fighters in the Syrian conflict, and it has led the fighting on the ground in many of the most strategically crucial battles on behalf of the regime. It has been widely reported that the Russian military regards Hezbollah commanders and fighters as uniquely competent among the pro-Assad ground forces. Moscow's air force and intelligence services have partnered with in the conflict. Hezbollah now controls several key areas of Syria, as far from Lebanon as the crucial al-Bukamal region adjacent to the Iraqi border.

Moreover, Hezbollah now serves as the vanguard and chief expeditionary training force for a growing network of pro-Iranian militias, terrorist groups, and other nonstate actors proliferating in destabilized Arab countries. Along with the IRGC, Hezbollah has been significantly active in Iraq²⁰ and Yemen²¹, and, according to many reports, increasingly in Bahrain as well²². In effect, where the IRGC wants to arm, train, and empower local pro-Iranian violent extremist organizations, Hezbollah is likely to be dispatched to share its experiences, capabilities, and formidable expertise.

The state-within-a-state model Hezbollah has pioneered in Lebanon is in great danger of being replicated, at least to some extent, in Iraq²³. The PMF militia groups formed with the encouragement of the Iraqi government after June 2014, ostensibly to battle ISIL and other extremist organizations, could develop into an Iraqi analog. Moves by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in early 2018 to reorganize the PMFs¹⁴ and incorporate them into the Iraqi

military could place these organizations under the control of the Baghdad government. However, there is also danger that these organizations, including the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Kataib Hezbollah, among others, many of which have extensive histories of sectarian violence and terrorist attacks, will be free to exercise state prerogatives and authority either alongside or in the place of the actual government. If Iraq continues to develop more independent policies that undercut Iranian hegemony, and reintegrate with the Arab world, the IRGC would likely attempt to strategically deploy the PMFs, particularly the more extreme and sectarian among them, to undermine the power of the state or leverage Tehran's influence in Baghdad.

1980s, Iran does not appear to have played a major role in the founding of the Houthi movement in the 1990s. However, during the course of the recent conflict in Yemen, and particularly since the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition following the Houthi seizure of Sanaa in 2014, Iran has been able to greatly increase its support for and interaction with the Houthis and thereby make itself part of a conflict in which it had been previously only marginally involved.

Iran and Hezbollah strongly deny that they are arming, advising, and training the Houthis, but a strong body of evidence suggests they are increasingly doing just that. In particular, both Saudi Arabia and the United States have accused Iran of providing the Houthis with rockets and missiles the group has used to target a range of Saudi cities since 2017²⁵. The United States presented evidence to the United Nations that links Iran to these munitions, and the United Nations has confirmed that point while passing no definitive judgment on how the Houthis came to acquire them²⁶. There is also evidence that Hezbollah has lost fighters in Yemen²⁷.

Nonetheless, the Houthis do not have the same kind of direct and subordinate relationship with the IRGC or any other Iranian entity that Hezbollah or many of the PMFs do. The boast by an Iranian parliamentarian that Tehran now controls four Arab capitals – Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and Sanaa – is greatly overblown²⁸. On the other hand, Tehran certainly has acquired a level of influence and often hegemony in the countries mentioned precisely by using sectarian nonstate actors, militias, and extremist groups to destabilize and undermine its Arab neighbors.

This problem has been getting worse, particularly in the past five years. And there is little reason to believe that, unless Iran suffers some serious strategic setbacks, this strategy will either be abandoned or become less effective. While several particularly destabilizing conflicts in

One of the most problematic elements in the network of Iranian-backed extremist and nonstate actors is the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Unlike most of the other pro-Iranian militant groups, the Houthis are

of a very different denomination (Zaydi Fivers) than the Twelver orientation that predominates among most Shias in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. While Iran's contact with the Zaydis dates back to the

the Arab world appear to be subsiding, some – such as the war in Syria – appear to be doing so largely on Iran's terms, and Tehran has shown an ability and willingness to manufacture crises when necessary. Other opportunities for such destabilizing activities plainly exist. For years Iran has attempted to seduce Hamas into becoming a Palestinian version of Hezbollah, and while that organization's Muslim Brotherhood orientation has greatly complicated such efforts, Iran has not given up. Iran's influence in Bahrain is reportedly slowly metastasizing, and the potential for urban terrorism in that country remains very real. And Morocco recently suspended diplomatic relations with Iran, accusing Tehran and Hezbollah of directly supporting the Polisario Front rebels in Western Sahara²⁹.

The Iranian strategy deliberately seeks to undermine and usurp the authority of Arab governments, or exploit and exacerbate existing crises. In particular, it intends to promote and expand sectarian divisions in Arab societies, allowing Iran and its proxies to pose as champions of besieged or threatened Shia communities. The strategy has worked so well in recent years that traditional Shia political narratives in the Arab world have in many cases gone from emphasizing persecution and victimhood to often now reflecting a triumphalist sense of power and authority over others. That dynamic, in turn, opens the door for "jihadist" groups like al-Qaeda or ISIL to pose as champions of existentially threatened communities in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere.

Pro-Iranian nonstate actors and the various jihadist groups, therefore, feed off each other, with sectarian extremism begetting more sectarian extremism in a vicious cycle, all at the expense of Arab states, societies, and peoples. Ending this cycle of sectarian antagonism in the near term, and repairing traditionally multid denominational, multiethnic, and diverse Arab societies in the long term, are among the most urgent tasks facing the Arab world in the coming years.

THE QATAR BOYCOTT

Regional leadership, agency, and influence in the Arab world has shifted decisively in recent years, particularly since the Arab Spring, away from more traditional centers of power such as Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad toward the Gulf Arab countries. As a result, disputes among Gulf Cooperation Council countries resonate regionally as well as locally. The most significant of these is the boycott of Qatar that was launched in early June 2017 by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, along with Egypt. This unprecedented action represented the culmination of a series of long-standing grievances by these countries against Doha's regional policies and relationships with extremist and opposition groups. Indeed, the boycotting countries describe themselves as the «anti-terror quartet.» The standoff, which is now well into its second year, not only influences relations between these countries, but also between their friends and allies throughout the region and beyond, and even affects the calculations of great powers like the United States.

The announcement of the boycott seemed sudden and unexpected but was essentially a continuation and intensification of a long-standing dispute between Qatar and several of its Gulf Arab neighbors. In particular, the quartet objects to Qatar's financial, political, and media support for a range of Islamist, populist, and demagogic organizations throughout the Arab world. A key grievance is Doha's backing of Islamist, and particularly Muslim Brotherhood, organizations. The UAE, in particular, has long objected to Qatar serving as a hub, financier, and media promoter, particularly through its Al Jazeera television network,

of Islamist extremists, especially of the Brotherhood variety. This view has become increasingly shared by Saudi Arabia and is also strongly embraced by the government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt. All four of the boycotting countries strongly believe that Al Jazeera, in particular, was attempting to destabilize Egypt after the ouster of Morsi, which they regard as a direct and significant threat to regional stability. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the UAE accuse Qatar of providing extensive and direct support for Islamists and other opposition groups from their own societies, including by funding and harboring them, as well as providing them with passports and other essential documents. The accusations are therefore practical as well as ideological. Its neighbors insist that Qatar had promised to amend its conduct in agreements signed in 2013-14³⁰, but, they insist, Doha has not lived up to those commitments.

The ideological argument essentially boils down to the question of what can be considered legitimate and tolerable manifestations of politicized Islam in mainstream or normative Arab political life and what, conversely, must be rejected as inadmissible. The view long championed by the UAE holds that radical Islamists in effect form a unified ideological continuum that features differences in degrees but not in kind. Therefore, while there are obvious distinctions between Brotherhood parties and al-Qaeda or ISIL, and the groups may consider each other rivals or even enemies, they are essentially manifestations of the same basic political ideology of radical and revolutionary Islamism. Therefore, even where Brotherhood parties focus on political and ideological efforts rather than violence, they share many if not most of the core, foundational assumptions of the violent extremist groups and, crucially, most of their long-term aims such as the eventual unification of the Islamic world under a new reactionary theological caliphate. The Brotherhood must, therefore, be regarded as a core part of the problem, the main source of inspiration for this kind of violent extremism and, in effect, a «gateway drug» that is essential in setting extremists down the path that can quickly and logically lead to mass murder and mayhem.

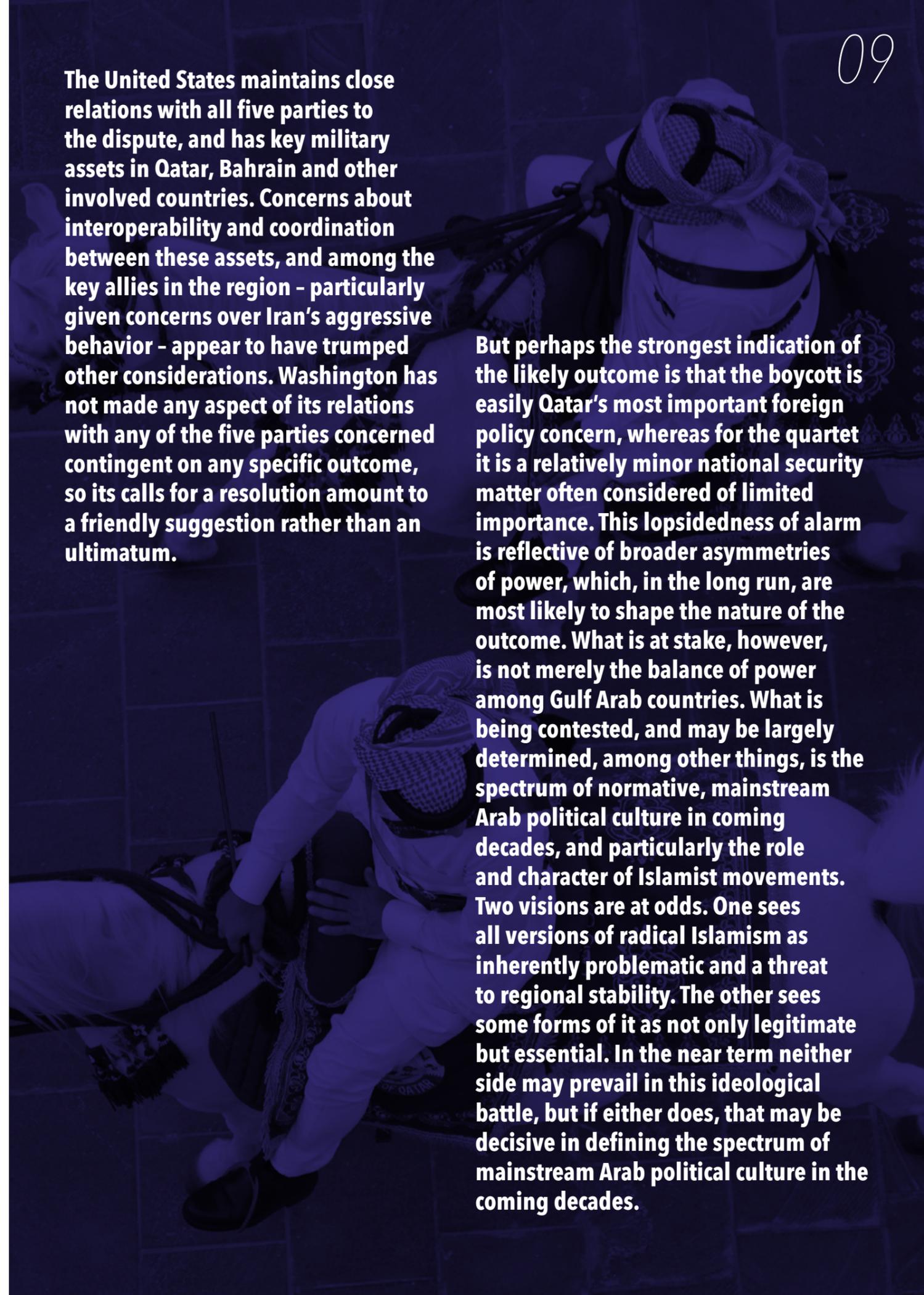
Qatar, therefore, purports to not only be a bullied underdog, but also a champion of Western and liberal values such as free speech, democracy, and tolerance (though not for Qataris themselves, and while supporting extremist religious reactionaries around the region). The quartet also accuses Qatar of clandestinely backing violent extremist groups, sometimes including the Taliban (which has a de facto embassy in Doha), pro-Iranian hostage-takers, and even al-Qaeda or ISIL³¹. To be sure, Qatar has supported and hosted many opposition figures from other Arab countries, including numerous dissidents and extremists from its GCC partners. Media outlets on both sides also routinely accuse each other of a wide range of supposed offenses. Allegations of hacking, email theft, and falsified news have been consistent features of the confrontation.

Evidence suggests that the quartet from the outset anticipated that the boycott could be a very slow and drawn out process that may or may not result in policy changes in Doha. Officials such as UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash have said that the boycott relationship could be seen as a «new normal» for relations among the parties³². The absence of prospects for a near-term resolution to the standoff appears to confirm this assessment.

Qatar has developed a number of workarounds to mitigate damage from the boycott, including increased use of Iranian airspace and closer relations with Turkey and other non-GCC partners. Qatar remains keen to end the boycott but doesn't show any signs of making the changes the quartet has demanded. Meanwhile, the boycotting countries, notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, appear to have largely moved past the issue and do not seem to regard it as particularly pressing under the current circumstances. Meanwhile, the confrontation has affected strategic and political calculations as far afield as the Horn of Africa, where the Somali national government in Mogadishu has sided with Qatar, while local authorities in Somaliland and Puntland are growing closer to the UAE.

The United States maintains close relations with all five parties to the dispute, and has key military assets in Qatar, Bahrain and other involved countries. Concerns about interoperability and coordination between these assets, and among the key allies in the region – particularly given concerns over Iran's aggressive behavior – appear to have trumped other considerations. Washington has not made any aspect of its relations contingent on any specific outcome, so its calls for a resolution amount to a friendly suggestion rather than an ultimatum.

But perhaps the strongest indication of the likely outcome is that the boycott is easily Qatar's most important foreign policy concern, whereas for the quartet it is a relatively minor national security matter often considered of limited importance. This lopsidedness of alarm is reflective of broader asymmetries of power, which, in the long run, are most likely to shape the nature of the outcome. What is at stake, however, is not merely the balance of power among Gulf Arab countries. What is being contested, and may be largely determined, among other things, is the spectrum of normative, mainstream Arab political culture in coming decades, and particularly the role and character of Islamist movements. Two visions are at odds. One sees all versions of radical Islamism as inherently problematic and a threat to regional stability. The other sees some forms of it as not only legitimate but essential. In the near term neither side may prevail in this ideological battle, but if either does, that may be decisive in defining the spectrum of mainstream Arab political culture in the coming decades.



A FOURTH SAUDI STATE?

The final factor that is significantly reshaping the Arab political and strategic landscape might, at first glance, appear to be merely the internal economic, social, and political dynamics at play within one sovereign Arab state: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. However, the dramatic transformation in Saudi society that is being led by King Salman bin Abdulaziz and, especially, his son, Mohammed bin Salman, who serves as crown prince, deputy prime minister, and minister of defense, has broader regional resonance and significance. Given the shift in regional leadership away from traditional power centers and toward Gulf countries, the largest, among them, Saudi Arabia, has effectively emerged as a decisive Arab regional leader with the UAE as its strongest regional partner. What's happening in Saudi Arabia will not, therefore, simply be contained in Saudi Arabia, but is likely to have an enormous influence in the rest of the region.

It's no exaggeration to describe what is now developing as the emergence of a fourth Saudi state. If it succeeds, at the end of this process Saudi Arabia will bear little resemblance in its economy, social norms, and governance structures to the third Saudi state that was established in 1932. And already, while structural and administrative political changes may appear modest by such sweeping historical standards, in fact the Saudi way of life is changing rapidly and in many ways dramatically.³³

The scope and scale of the transformation underway in Saudi Arabia should not be underestimated. The Vision 2030 plan

seeks to fundamentally alter the essential characteristics of the Saudi economy, diversifying it from a near-total reliance on energy and introducing a range of new public and private initiatives.³⁴ Using the Public Investment Fund, the Saudi government plans at least 80 major new projects across a range of public services and other sectors. Another key goal is to bolster the private sector and spur massive foreign investment in the country.

The transformation also focuses on labor market adjustments, and particularly Saudization of a workforce that has been heavily reliant on foreign and migrant labor at every level. In effect, the Saudi government seeks to put its citizens to work and encourage them to be productive members of the workforce rather than subsidized and protected subjects. That means, in effect, changing not only the social contract in the country but also the relationship between the state and the individual. The goal is nothing less than to fundamentally adjust the way average Saudis think about such basic issues as work and education, as well as the role of religion, and what they can expect from the government and each other as compatriots.

Encouraging the Saudi citizenry to think and act as an empowered workforce with agency and productive dynamism naturally also means empowering that half of the potential national workforce that is female. The decision to allow women to drive³⁵ is a necessary, but in many ways preliminary, step in that direction. Restrictions against gender mixing in public, educational, and work spaces are already being lifted³⁶ and that process is likely to continue. Ultimately, a level of women's rights and empowerment previously unthinkable in Saudi Arabia will be necessary if women are to become part of a productive national workforce.

A generally underappreciated but profound aspect of the transformation project is the focus on developing industries of entertainment, tourism, and other leisure activities. In effect, the Saudi government is pushing to reintroduce public amusements and entertainments to a society that has forbidden most forms of them in the public sphere for decades. This is partly an economic initiative. A great deal of money that is either not spent, or is spent outside Saudi Arabia, can be directed within, and huge markets tapped. But it's also part of the agenda of greater social openness that is a key aspect of the reform initiative. Not only is the power of religious reactionaries to prevent these reforms being curbed, the crown prince has spoken passionately³⁷ about the need to redefine Saudi religious attitudes to embrace traditional Islamic virtues of moderation and tolerance that were suppressed, he says, especially after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran³⁸. All of these agenda items are crucial to the young, more worldly, and well-educated segments of Saudi society, who appear to be enthusiastic about his national reform policies.

Regarding governance, it is plausible to describe the series of bold moves led by the king and crown prince as a kind of autogolpe, or self-coup, in which the leaders of a state, without stepping down themselves, undertake to change the governance system of which they are the titular heads. The long-established, complex, and relatively decentralized network of fiefdoms and prerogatives distributed around the upper echelons of the royal family appears to have been quickly and dramatically displaced. Certainly the anti-corruption crackdown of 2017, in which scores of leading Saudi citizens were detained, many at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh, was avowedly designed to end what the crown prince and his supporters said was intolerably endemic corruption at the highest levels.³⁹

The Saudi reform program faces a considerable conundrum regarding social, national, and economic capacity that it has yet to overcome. Saudi Arabia's ambitions and resources are great, and when combined with such dynamic leadership, the country's potential is enormous. However, Saudi Arabia faces a profound challenge of capacity at every level. The institutional, educational, individual, and public and private organizational capacities of the country may not be sufficient, at this stage, to fully realize plans such as those laid out in Vision 2030. Indeed, one of the clear aims of the reform program is to create such capacity. But this presents the country with a short-term Catch-22, insofar as human and

institutional capacity is needed now to implement the reforms that are intended to create precisely those capacities. How Saudi Arabia can develop the human and institutional resources it needs, virtually in real time, precisely as it requires them is a daunting project. Japan, Singapore, and South Korea all, arguably, managed some version of this development strategy in the past, but it is a rare and unusual achievement.

The experiment in transformation currently underway in Saudi Arabia is not just a response to specifically Saudi realities and concerns. Certainly, Saudi Arabia faces an unavoidable need to reform its economy and, therefore, its basic social contract. The traditional model of widespread public patronage simply will not work into the foreseeable future. There is no meaningful dispute regarding the urgent need to diversify the Saudi economy and mobilize its workforce to much greater productivity. If anything, the Saudi government has come to these matters a little late, although they can now hardly be faulted for insufficient ambition.

While Arab Spring revolts succeeded in shaking and even bringing down governments in some Arab republics, Arab Spring-inspired demonstrations did not have a similar impact on the Gulf states. Nonetheless many of the underlying causes of the unrest were endemic to the contemporary Arab world. This is not to say that monarchies such as the Gulf Arab countries currently face the prospect of similar popular uprisings. There is little reason to think they do. But even without this potential, the Arab world in general has in recent decades become ossified, stagnant, and in considerable need of rejuvenation. The Arab Spring revolts implicitly tested one model of change: bottom-up, chaotic, and undirected. With the possible exception of Tunisia, the results have been uniformly disturbing, and in several instances, disastrous. Revolutionary tumult has been tested and is plainly not the answer to the profound challenges facing most, if not all, Arab societies.

Therefore, the present-day Saudi experiment serves – whether intentionally, appropriately, fairly, or not – as a major test of a second model of Arab transformation: top-down, organized, and directed. Indeed, while much of the social and economic transformation thus far has been progressive and provided for greater opportunities for ordinary citizens and openness in the society, it has been accompanied and arguably enabled by a centralization of power.

The particulars are obviously specific to Saudi Arabia, and much of this experience could not be replicated anywhere else, given that each society has its own characteristics. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has many advantages, as well as challenges, that few other Arab countries possess. However, should the current Saudi experiment in highly ambitious, centrally directed, social and economic transformation prove even partially successful, the example in its broadest terms is likely to prove influential. It could provide the basis for an alternative approach to the tragedy of undirected revolutionary chaos for those Arab societies facing unavoidable pressures for rapid transformation.

COMBATING RADICAL ISLAMISM

In order to combat the continued appeal of political Islamists, particularly among underserved or marginalized communities, it is essential for national and local governments and humanitarian aid programs to provide the requisite essential social services and close down the space extremists have exploited to capture and command the loyalties of impoverished or deprived constituencies. In addition, other means of empowering and enfranchising these constituencies politically and socially must be found in order to counteract the appeal of revolutionary Islamist groups. There will be a range of answers in the diverse and different Arab societies that are dealing with the same Islamist threat but in greatly varying contexts. However, as long as large parts of society feel neglected and excluded they will remain prey to the siren call of radicals who promise both spiritual salvation and earthly redemption simultaneously, in exchange for capitulation to, and support for, their political agenda.

Moreover, a campaign to promote traditional, tolerant, and diverse interpretations of Islam both as a faith and as a social text informing daily living is essential. The post-Arab Spring developments demonstrate that Islamists have not captured or controlled the Arab political sphere. To the contrary, they are experiencing a profound political crisis. However, in many Arab societies Islamist movements have scored a large degree of success over the past century of their existence by redefining in their own reactionary and nontraditional terms the parameters of normative Islam in the eyes of far too many people. Intellectuals, religious organizations, educational institutions, media, and governments should systematically reintroduce much of the Arab public to the tolerant, polyphonic, and multitranslational interpretations of Islam that have dominated the faith for most of its history but have been

increasingly marginalized in recent decades due to relentless and coordinated Islamist activism. As things stand, the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies have convinced far too many Arab Muslims that their interpretation of religion, if not politics, accurately reflects Islamic traditions. This is a deception that must be exposed and corrected.

DEFEATING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Terrorist groups and other violent extremists plainly thrive where chaos prevails and government writs do not run. In every case of a major outbreak of terrorist activity, widespread turmoil and open warfare has been the essential precursor of these criminal enterprises. In Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and so on, conflict has created the vacuum of governance and security into which al-Qaeda, ISIL, and other such groups have inserted themselves. As these Arab and Muslim states have failed or collapsed into violence, terrorist groups can operate with impunity, create and conduct elaborate criminal enterprises yielding massive profits, including kidnapping, while claiming to protect vulnerable populations against sectarian or ideological enemies. In some cases, they can even claim to be saviors bringing order to chaos and allowing people some respite, no matter how harsh, from the depredations of anarchy – a situation that in many cases they have helped to nurture.

The most extreme example of this was the ISIL «caliphate» in Syria and Iraq, which has been effectively eliminated. Yet in both countries the group retains groups of fighters and remains a potent spoiler. Under the wrong conditions, ISIL could certainly make a resurgence. And as long as the crisis of the state and governance in the Arab world persists, and governments and states fail, terrorist and other criminal groups will find fertile soil to plant their malice and mayhem. Therefore, a key factor in defeating terrorism is removing from these groups the crucial factor of failing states and collapsing governments and denying them an open field in which to operate. Rebuilding the Arab state system, helping create more stable and effectively governed Arab countries, and, as a first step, adequately reconstructing areas ravaged by war will be essential. Otherwise, the pattern of state failure will continue, and little or nothing will stop terrorists from exploiting the instability yet again.

Finally, jihadist terrorism must be defeated at an ideational level. Since terrorist groups derive much of their ideology, and many of their recruits, from radical Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood, there is an intimate connection between defeating terrorism and combating all forms of Islamism. But in many Arab societies effectively competing political and even religious discourses still have to be fully developed and propagated to the general public in order to offset the appeal of Islamism and jihadist terrorism alike. The frustrated, impoverished, bored, or socially abandoned young men who are preyed on by terrorist groups as recruits are sometimes just trying to make money or are true believers in extremist ideology. But often they are lost souls looking to participate in something greater than themselves and for a grand cause for which to live or die. The terrorists certainly offer them that, and all too frequently there are no obvious or readily available rousing alternatives. People in general, and young men in particular, need alternative opportunities, positive causes, and constructive ideologies to inspire them and inform their commitments. Because these often either don't exist in many Arab societies or have not been properly developed and communicated, the struggle against violent extremism is likely to be prolonged. But the answers are not mysterious or unavailable. What draws young men to violent extremism is fairly well documented and understood, and as long as alternatives remain unavailable or unconvincing, terrorists will continue to find recruits.

CONCLUSION FUTURE TRENDS FOR THESE KEY DEVELOPMENTS

COMBATTING SECTARIANISM AND IRANIAN HEGEMONY

Like “jihadist” groups, pro-Iranian militias thrive when chaos and civil conflict destabilize Arab governments and societies. And since both these forces promote divisive, zero-sum sectarian narratives in order to inflame communities against each other and view violent extremists as defenders of last resort in an existential crisis, restoring and rebuilding Arab states and the Arab state system is essential for combating both. Pro-Iranian militias developed in the context of Arab state failure, but also against a backdrop of genuine historical grievances. Therefore, discrimination against, and marginalization of, Shia communities in the Arab world is inherently dangerous and opens the door to Iranian meddling. Indeed, Iran and its Shia Arab clients relied on narratives of victimization for the formation of these groups, but in some cases sectarian rhetoric now holds that Shia political power and authority over others is natural and essential. Therefore, formerly marginalized communities have, in some cases, become themselves dominant and oppressive, and have developed rhetorical justifications for that power.

Yet Arab Shia constituencies remain Arab, and are not Iranian. Iraqi Shias, for example, are Iraqis, and the most natural circumstance is for them to pursue their own national interest rather than to follow Iran’s imperatives. Indeed, the reintegration of Iraq into the Arab world is in the interests of almost all Iraqis, and is essential for Iraqi national security, stability, and unity. Gulf Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have made substantial inroads in helping Iraqis, including leaders of Shia communities, begin to reclaim their own national interests, distinct from Iran, and their Arab identity and connections to the rest of the Arab world. That process needs to be intensified and fully realized. Moreover, it serves as a potential model for pushing back against Iranian encroachment in other Arab countries. In cases such as Lebanon and Yemen where pro-Iranian militias have usurped some or even most of the authority and prerogatives of the national government, rebuilding the state will be essential to curtailing their dominance. In neither case do Hezbollah or the Houthis represent anything more than a minority of Lebanese and Yemenis, respectively. Their holds on national power are largely based on force. The reintegration of the Lebanese and Yemeni societies, and the empowerment of other communities and constituencies would naturally and inevitably degrade the undue authority these dangerous nonstate actors have accumulated. Such militias may now serve as proxies for Iran, but abandoning their deeper constituencies to Iranian influence for the foreseeable future would be the gravest possible mistake.

The international campaign to hold Iran accountable for backing such violent extremist organizations is also imperative, as it will increase the costs to Iran for such irresponsible policies. Ultimately, however, the Arab world cannot seek its internal stability primarily through containing, or a rapprochement with, Iran. It must earn and protect it on its own terms. That means a long-term project to rebuild Arab governance where it has frayed, repair governments that are failing, end civil conflicts based on reasonable and inclusive arrangements that respect the legitimate rights and aspirations of all communities, ensure respect for formerly marginalized constituencies including Shias, and reintegrate sectarian and ethnic minorities into diverse and tolerant Arab states and the regional system.

THE SUSTAINABILITY OF GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL

The quartet of countries boycotting Qatar from the outset indicated a willingness to persist in the isolation campaign and for it even to become a «new normal» in the Gulf region. However, they have also indicated a desire to repair relations with Doha if Qatar amends its policies, particularly support for Islamists and opposition figures in other Arab, and especially Gulf, countries. The GCC continues to function, including with its Qatari employees, and to engage in strategic dialogue with the United States, European countries, Russia, and others. The other Gulf Arab countries can live without Qatar’s cooperation much more easily than Qatar can live without theirs, but almost all parties agree that these states are better off coordinating with, rather than shunning, each other. Qatar cannot relocate itself or change its inherent geographical and demographic realities. It is, therefore, likely that, eventually, Qatar will seek terms from the quartet for repairing the relationship. But the precise scenario for this cannot be predicted given that the standoff is well into its second year.

As long as the boycott continues, Qatar will remain isolated and punished for its damaging policies. However, this opens new opportunities for Iran and, especially, Turkey to meddle in Gulf affairs and solidify their alliances with Doha. The Qatar-Turkey axis in particular has been greatly strengthened because of Doha’s response to the boycott, providing Ankara with new opportunities to try to spread its influence in the Arab world. However, both Turkey and Iran now find themselves in profound economic crises, greatly limiting their ability to help secure Qatar’s interests and defend its prerogatives. Qatar may have miscalculated yet again by counting on these two revisionist powers as key allies, a policy that was an original cause of the boycott and has been intensified as a consequence of it. Nonetheless, by maintaining strong ties to Washington, Qatar has been able to fend off the most problematic potential short-term consequences. In the longer run, however, Doha will likely face a series of painful and difficult choices. The GCC continues to be a potentially viable and important organization, but it cannot be fully functional as long as the boycott continues. It is now being augmented by bilateral arrangements between Saudi Arabia and both the UAE and Kuwait, which could strengthen and reinforce the GCC or begin to lay the basis for alternatives to it, depending on how the standoff plays out. Moreover, so long as the boycott continues, Qatar and the quartet are likely to act more as rivals than partners in the Arab world, backing competing sides in Libya, the Palestinian territories, and elsewhere. Until the dispute is resolved, therefore, the Gulf region will remain divided and in competition with itself, and its potential regional influence will be therefore weakened. Once it is resolved, however, a united and coordinated Gulf Arab regional influence could be considerably strengthened and the role of outside forces such as Turkey and Iran concomitantly reduced.

PROSPECTS FOR A FOURTH SAUDI STATE

Saudi Arabia has many resources and advantages that give it an excellent chance of succeeding in its social and economic reform project. Energy is still an important source of foreign exchange. Saudi Arabia’s human resources are impressive and, especially among youth, are being increasingly marshaled in a more productive manner. There is an unprecedented dynamism in Saudi society, particularly among younger people, that is palpable and impressive. And the current leadership appears popular, determined, ambitious, and decisive. Therefore, the social and economic reform project being spearheaded by the crown prince has a realistic and arguably strong chance of succeeding, especially since it appears that a majority of Saudis are in favor of this effort and committed to its realization, which could be a vital factor in helping to determine the eventual outcome. If it is to be achieved, it will have to be done fairly quickly, that is to say over the next few decades. It’s a tall order, but all the elements of success are present.

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