



**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**

**The Game of Camps**  
*Ideological Fault Lines in the  
Wreckage of the Arab State System*

Eran Lerman



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 124

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BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

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# **The Game of Camps:** *Ideological Fault Lines in the Wreckage of the Arab State System*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In recent years, Arab politics has been marked by national disintegration, violent conflict and bitter rivalries, as well as new patterns of cooperation and efforts to counter extremist forces. Some states have ceased to exist, torn apart by ideological imperatives that are often intertwined with local power politics and sectarian affiliations. Sharp rifts have emerged, such as the rupture between Egypt and Turkey: a relationship that shifted from friendship to public hostility overnight after the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt. New alliances have been forged as well.

Essentially, the most important shifts have occurred along ideological fault lines, and need to be understood in these terms. This study maps four Arab ideological camps and their interactions: the Iranian camp, the Islamic State camp, the Muslim Brotherhood camp, and the “counter camp.” This camp consists of the forces of stability, ranging from Saudi Arabia and most of the Gulf states to Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, as well as the Kurds and other non-Arab players.

These camps have been fighting each other to the death across a range of regional fronts, from Libya to Syria to Iraq to Yemen, and in subversive political and terrorist actions elsewhere. Events over the first half of 2016 confirm that the balance is tilting. Islamic State and its affiliates are still vicious, but they are under siege and losing ground, while Muslim Brotherhood forces are in political decline.

The main battle for the future of the region pits the Iranian camp against the forces of stability. Israel shares the fears and goals of the counter camp, and is joined with it in countering Iran. The US administration’s courtship of Iran, as well as the hope held broadly in the West that the Muslim Brotherhood could play a constructive role, has done little to restore stability or restrain the rise of radicalism.





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## **INTRODUCTION: THE STATE OF REGIONAL DYNAMICS**

Within the last five years, much of the post-Ottoman state system has essentially ceased to exist. The basic geopolitical units put in place a century ago by the victors of World War I are less and less relevant. Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen have been torn apart. Lebanon, which had fallen under the thumb of an externally controlled terror organization, had already lost any semblance of true sovereignty even before the misnamed “Arab Spring” began. The Palestinians have been governed by two hostile governments since 2007. The GCC, too, saw deep divisions emerge over ideological orientation.

These events cannot be explained by an examination of old patterns of “the changing game of Arab politics”, nor by the more traditional tools of analysis based on *raison d'état*.<sup>1</sup> New navigational maps are required. The four-way taxonomy offered here was developed over time from the perspective of a national security official, but other scholars and officials in Israel and elsewhere have come to similar conclusions. As the bitter rivalries between camps have intensified, the contours of this new landscape have become more pronounced.

The central argument of this study is that ideological associations and affinities have played a major role, often superseding the imperatives of *raison d'état*. As the landscape was recast by political orientation (with religious or confessional identities often used, or abused, to mobilize support for specific agendas), it became the formative element in shaping

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strategic alliances and the frontiers of conflict. This is not, after all, the first time ideas about political and social order, and the groups based on those ideas, have driven both domestic and foreign policy, replacing or overcoming more primordial allegiances.

This is an observation as old as Thucydides, who, side by side with his brutal depictions of power politics, offered a vivid description of the depths of depravity plumbed by camps and factions clashing along what we would now call ideological lines. In Corcyra, where the democrats of the “People” fought the “Few” (the oligarchic party), “Death thus raged in every shape; and, as usually happens at such times, there was no length to which violence did not go; sons were killed by their fathers, and supplicants dragged from the altar...”<sup>2</sup>

The violence of ideological strife should also be familiar to those who have studied the post-Napoleonic Holy Alliance or the dynamics of the Cold War, as well as the spread of transnational terror networks. This paper rests on an analysis based on such ideological associations.

Primordial or “essentialist” explanations, and specifically the Sunni-Shi’a divide, are certainly relevant, particularly as Iran and Saudi Arabia are increasingly focused on each other as the main enemy. Such explanations are not, however, always sufficient.

This study offers a four-way analysis. The first camp is the Iranian, with its complex set of members and affiliates, some driven by ideology, others by plunder. The second is IS and other al-Qa’eda offshoots, in a hurry to destroy the existing order. The third is the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and its friends, which combine ideological imperatives and regional power competition. And the fourth may be loosely termed the Forces of Stability. These are the states and leaders who both fear and resent the new revolutionary forces that threaten “normal life” (and their survival in power and privilege).

These camps have old roots, but cannot be fully reduced to ancient confessional rivalries. Current affiliations include significant cross-denominational alliances based on ideology as well as on stark strategic need.

Of these four camps, the composition and prospects of which are analyzed in detail below, two have been significantly weakened in recent years:

- In the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, the decisive moment was their loss of power in Egypt in July 2013. To this should be added the decision by the al-Nahdha party in Tunisia to relinquish power (and in June 2016, to disband as a “movement” and concentrate on its role as a political party in a democratic framework). At the other end of the MB spectrum is Hamas, which finds itself in an increasingly difficult predicament. There is growing pressure on MB offshoots in the west as well, including initiatives in Britain and the US Congress to restrict their activities.
- Even more dramatic has been the decline of the so-called Caliphate or “Islamic State” (IS). (The common acronym ISIS is wrong for several reasons, not least because the man who renamed himself Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi now claims the loyalty of terror groups well beyond Iraq and Syria.) IS has suffered serious military reversals on several fronts: in northern Iraq, Syria and the Benghazi area in Cyrenaica.

Both groups remain formidable, in large part because of ideologically driven Turkish support (for the MB) or ambiguity (towards IS). However, neither camp is likely to become the ascendant power in the foreseeable future.

Iran, together with her proxies and allies, is a different proposition. The nuclear “deal,” the relaxation of sanctions, the parade of Western economic suitors, and even the recent political gains by so-called “reformist” elements make it easier for Supreme Leader Ali Khamene’i and the real powers that be in Tehran, led by the IRGC, to pursue their bid for regional hegemony. Their object is to transform world affairs by overthrowing the existing order.

The Iranian “camp” contains diverse elements, including the non-Muslim leadership in Syria. It casts a long shadow, from Sana’a to Damascus and from the Straits of Hormuz to the Mediterranean. The Russian intervention in Syria serves them well, but has also heightened the sense of alarm among the forces of stability, led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt (which are, in effect, supported by Israel).

Those countries have responded in an assortment of ways, including military action in Yemen, the designation of Hezbollah as a terror group, and the continued use of increased oil production as a tool to undermine the Iranian economy (and the main source of Russian income). The intensity and variety of these responses indicate just how deep and powerful are the fears of the forces of stability. Their ability to bring these tools to bear in the event that they are effectively supported by key Western powers (by no means a foregone conclusion) will determine the future of the region and much beyond it.

International responses play an important part in shaping the dynamics of this four-way struggle for power. For much too long, the political stasis reflected political constraints and misguided strategies in Washington and in major European capitals. The most egregious of these were the notions that the Muslim Brotherhood can be a strategic partner and that Iran can be tamed. Both premises are now being questioned, and the West is awakening to the full consequences of its passive policies in the face of determined enemies.

The manner in which Putin used Russian actions in Syria to his strategic advantage added to the growing realization that past policies must be reevaluated. For the time being, however, it seems that the struggle will remain protracted, and its outcome is far from certain. This makes Israel's role in bolstering the necessary resolve, and quietly assisting the forces of stability against the variants of Islamism, all the more important.

## **WHAT DROVE THE UPHEAVAL?**

Extensive literature has emerged since 2011 to account for the dramatic collapse of what had been an extremely stable – indeed, ossified – political order for well over a generation.<sup>3</sup> The roots of this collapse can be traced to developments set in motion by the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and their consequences. It has brought to the surface powerful forces and dangerous fault lines which had been lying dormant for years. The use of the term “Arab Spring” to describe this collapse is both sad and ludicrous. If a natural phenomenon is to be used, it should be an earthquake, a wrenching upheaval that shattered not only regimes but long-established states.

The last earthquake to shake the regional system was induced by the end of the Cold War, and the rise of the US to a position of undisputed dominance after the Kuwait War of 1991. It did bring about the demise of one state (the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) and other political convulsions, some of them painful (above all, the Algerian civil war, a tragic clash between a failed democratization attempt and radical Islamism). It also led old Soviet allies like Arafat and Assad to take what for them were desperate measures and come to an American negotiating table. But at the end of the day, no regime – not even Saddam's – was overthrown, and no states disintegrated in the manner now evident across the region.

Starting in 2011, however, the earthquake that continues to shake the region with constant tremors originated not in a distant epicenter in Moscow, but in tectonic political shifts within the region itself.

Two tangential precedents had already left their imprint. The first was the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which resulted in the forcible removal from power of the region's most ruthless dictatorship. The second was the 2005 agreement to consider the partition of Sudan, formalized by a referendum in January 2011 and the independence of South Sudan in July of that year – the most extensive formal dismemberment of an Arab country in history. But much more needed to happen to set in motion the turmoil that began in Tunisia in January 2011 and spread within weeks to Egypt, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and beyond. A broad range of factors were at play:

1. Economic stagnation and the massive failure to draw investment, build productive economies, and thus generate employment for the huge "youth bulge" typical of much of the Arab world (the median age is well below 25 in most Arab countries). This failure reflected problems of governance, from blatant corruption to Byzantine bureaucracies, which for decades had driven away not only international corporations and financial institutions (only a small proportion of global Free Direct Investment has flowed to the Arab world) but also local entrepreneurs.<sup>4</sup>
2. Deep-set social tensions and gaps between rich and poor. This is true between countries, with the Arabian peninsula providing perhaps the

ultimate illustration: the breathtaking, wasteful and often arrogant wealth in countries like the UAE and Qatar versus the abject poverty of Yemen. It is also evident within them: compare the affluent and insular neighborhoods of Cairo, like Zamalek, to “the City of the Dead” and the teeming areas flooded by recent internal migration;<sup>5</sup> or upper-class Damascus to the drought-stricken villages in much of the Syrian countryside).

3. Endemic, grand-scale abuse of power and bald theft by the ruling families and their cronies. Governmental corruption not only inhibited growth but undermined regime legitimacy and fed long-festered resentments against political elites. In Syria, for example, the role of Bashar’s maternal cousin, Rami Makhoul, was emblematic of this system of plunder.<sup>6</sup>
4. One aspect by which regimes effectively undermined their own legitimacy was their attempt to create “hereditary republics,” taking after the North Korean model. An Arabic term was coined for them: “*jamlakha*,” a cross between *jumhuriyyah*, republic, and *mamlakah*, kingdom.<sup>7</sup> This idea held (for a while) in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad was groomed to inherit the presidency. It met with much less tolerance in Egypt, Libya or Yemen – and ultimately, even Syrian acceptance turned out to be ephemeral. Interestingly, among all the proper monarchies of the Arab world, only Bahrain – a Sh’ia-majority country ruled by a Sunni dynasty – suffered the agonies of the recent turmoil. The problem was not the idea of hereditary rule per se. It was the perfidy of a presumed republic being treated as property by a family that is both corrupt and inept. The “real” monarchies, by contrast, have shown themselves capable of benevolence, and have been accepted as legitimate in socially coherent states.
5. In several cases (not including Tunisia or Egypt), this lack of regime legitimacy was dramatically compounded by confessional and ethnic rifts augmented by ideological differences (i.e., radical revolutionary interpretations of both Sunni and Shi’a traditions). These fissures revealed the lack of any real national identity. In Syria and Iraq in particular, permanent question marks have now been placed on the borders so nonchalantly negotiated in 1923 by Lloyd George and his

French counterparts with scant regard for realities on the ground.<sup>8</sup> This blurring of previously fixed borders accelerated the dynamics of disintegration. In northern Iraq, for example, the emerging reality of Kurdish “autonomy” since 1991 amounts to independence in all but name. This fact alone precludes a reintegration of either Iraq or Syria within centrally governed states.<sup>9</sup>

All of the above issues might have been amenable to less violent solutions had the culture and traditions of representative government been at work in the Arab world. But the experiment of Arab liberalism, still alive in the 1930s and 1940s, was largely extinguished during the Cold War, repressed and destroyed by the “republics (and monarchies) of fear.”<sup>10</sup> As Barry Rubin has shown, the few who kept its candle burning were mostly too weak, unprepared and ineffectual to offer an alternative when the moment of crisis came (with Tunisia offering the most significant exception to this rule).<sup>11</sup>

Thus, public dissatisfaction – once it broke through the crumbling surface of state repression and overcame the barrier of fear – either was coopted by organized Islamist parties and movements or deteriorated into chaos. Still, the “Arab Street” (the politically active segments of urban society in the Arab world) remained conflicted. The Street was much more aware of its political power, yet eager for stability and strong government after painful periods of turmoil.

The effect of the upheaval has not been equal. Several states fell apart along tribal, confessional and ultimately ideological lines. The Palestinians have been torn between nationalists and Islamists since 2007. Egypt and Tunisia went through political convulsions and periods of control by Islamists, but changed course and largely restabilized, due to the strength of their institutions and relatively homogenous populations. Still, even in those countries, the challenge of terrorism lingers.

Three categories of states have been able to avoid the full intensity of the upheaval so far:

- **The monarchies – five in the Gulf (except Bahrain), Jordan and Morocco.** The stability of these countries has been noted, and the legitimizing force of traditional allegiance remains relevant for them.



- **States with the fresh memory of a deadly civil war or other violent conflict.** These include Algeria, which suffered the murderous cycle of the 1990s; the Palestinian Authority areas, which bear the scars of a futile violent conflict with Israel in 2000-2004; and to some extent Lebanon. (The latter two, which are subject to the will of terrorists, can be described as having fallen apart long ago).
- **The key non-Arab players in the region.** These are Iran (although events in that country in 2009 were in some ways the forerunners of 2011); Turkey, which has had its own share of internal turmoil; and Israel. Each took advantage of the chaos in different ways, but all have come to see the dangers to their interests if the violence gets out of control.

The region thus contains, side by side: strong functional states; weak and dysfunctional ones; broken-up parts of states; local fiefdoms; and cross-national entities demanding confessional loyalty. To navigate this landscape, which some have compared with Europe's late medieval realities, a new cognitive map is required.

## CONTOURS OF A NEW MAP: THE FOUR IDEOLOGICAL CAMPS

When mapping the new landscape of the region, it has proven increasingly useful to speak of four distinct categories, or "camps." They are essentially ideological in nature, with sectarian affiliations playing an important but not always a determining role. These camps now dominate the post-"Spring" landscape:

- The Iranian regime and its network of allies and clients, proxies and agents, many of them Shi'a, but some Sunni or even non-Muslim
- The Muslim Brotherhood and the parties associated with it, backed by two powerful regional allies: Erdoğan's Turkey and the Qatari monarchy, each for its own reasons
- Global jihadists, derivatives of Bin Laden's "base" (al-Qa'eda), now dominated by the IS. Their origins can be traced to the Muslim Brotherhood, but their ideological outlook has evolved towards the

rejection of traditional social and political tools and the endorsement of unrestrained violence

- Regional powers that may not share clear ideological affinities, but are united against the forces that threaten stability and legitimacy. They are led by Egypt under its present government and by a Saudi leadership seeking a much more robust role in regional affairs. Israel also belongs to this camp due to her firm stance against radical Islamists and Iran.

All four are now locked into a deadly competition for hegemony in the Arab and Muslim world. Occasionally, an uncomfortable cooperation is forged among camps against a common enemy. This can blur the lines of distinction, but overall, the patterns of ideological (and to some extent, religious) allegiance remain clear. External forces, including both Russia and the US-led coalition against IS, are already being drawn into these battles, some for hard realist reasons and others because of moral outrage.

Other “camps” exist, but they have been marginalized and do not, for the time being, offer any prospect of coming to power anywhere in the region. They include:

- Secular socialist-nationalist parties. These are the remnants of a once-powerful ideological presence in the Arab world. Within living memory, in the heyday of the “Progressive Camp” (the Soviet Union and its system of local allies), these parties cast a shadow of dominance and revolutionary ambition across the entire region. They were once the undisputed forces of the future. But the Nasserists, the Ba’ath party (in both Syria and Iraq), the Palestinian left-wing revolutionary groups the PFLP and PDFLP, Qaddafi’s Libyan People’s Jamahiriyyah, and the Soviet “colony” in South Yemen (the PDRY) have all either been destroyed altogether or have gone into irreversible political and ideological decline. Saddam ended on the gallows, Qaddafi met an even uglier death, and Assad’s regime is fighting to stay alive, not to validate the Ba’ath creed. The sole survivor, the FLN in Algeria, has become a rather conservative force since the bloodstained 1990s.

- Meanwhile, the true liberals, who played a key role in setting the upheaval in motion (the “Facebook and Twitter generation” of the Jasmine Revolution and Tahrir Square) were simply not prepared, in either the moral or the practical senses of the word, to take power. In Tunisia, liberals proved more resilient than they were elsewhere. But any sober analysis of present political dynamics must acknowledge that the re-emergence, after three generations of repression, of real democrats in the region is still a long way off. They may represent the distant future of politics in the Arab world (and in Iran too, one day, if the regime finally cracks under the strain – albeit a less likely outcome following the nuclear deal, but not impossible).
- Some may suggest that in addition to the Salafi jihadists (such as al-Qaeda and IS) and the MB, non-jihadi Salafists (such as the Nur Party in Egypt, which won 25% of the vote in 2012) should count as a separate ideological category. But Nur was more of a flash in the pan, closely tied to the Saudi need to counter MB power, and quick to lose favor and disintegrate politically once in parliament.

It remains to be seen if any other variant, untouched by the totalitarian doctrines of MB or by the inherent violence of the jihadi strains of Islamism, can make its mark on the battlefield of political ideologies. So far, traditionalist religious voices have tended to find shelter against the ideological storm under the wings of the conservative forces of stability. Sisi, for example, has invited them to help forge interpretations of Islam that will not shame the religion of the Prophet in the eyes of the world.

## **THE THEORY BEHIND IDEOLOGICAL TAXONOMY**

The unfolding drama in the region requires an analytical framework that can take into account ideological affiliations as independent factors, rather than look upon them as strictly epiphenomenal to the interplay of state interests. The demands of “raison d’état” lose some of their explanatory force in situations in which there is no longer an état. Modifications of old wisdom are reflected in “constructivist” evolutions of the theoretical grounding of international relations. They point to situations in which ideological imperatives and ideas play a central role in the formulation of foreign policy and the behavior of both states and sub-state actors.

The focus here is on ideology as a modern political phenomenon, rather than on religion in its narrower sense. Bearing in mind that Islam was born as conquering religion, it is easy enough, in the face of violence carried out in the name of the faith, to be tempted by Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilizations and his famous line about Islam's bloody borders. The evidence does seem to pile up, from Bosnia to East Timor and from Chechnya to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>12</sup>

A closer look, however, reveals a civilization that may indeed conjure up potent images of violence and conquest, but is far from united and "on the march" against the West. It is torn by a murderous internal crisis, shedding mostly its own blood in incomprehensible amounts.

The rise of the Islamist camps can thus be described as the result of intellectual interbreeding between certain aspects of Islam and the influences and temptations offered by totalitarianism. Modern ideology, drawing on ancient faith and tradition but adjusting and re-interpreting them in terms derived from European revolutionary models, is at work here.

Once the Arab order fell apart, it was ideology run wild, coupled with armed insurgencies and well-organized subversive parties that had been waiting for this day, that came to fill the void. Naïve liberals who wanted to see a democratic landscape emerge from the ruins had no idea how to form parties or gain power, and were soon pushed aside. More aggressive forces, driven by what has been called "totalitarianism masquerading as religion," readily borrowed the organizational templates of modern revolutionary one-party states, fascist or Bolshevik, in their bid to take power.

With ideological fervor came ideological affiliations. One of Mark Haas's conclusions, in his study of the ideological origins of great power politics since 1789, was that grouping together was not unique to political liberalism:

"relations among monarchical states during the Concert of Europe... were just as cooperative as relations among liberal-democratic states in the twentieth century. In the contemporary system, we should similarly expect various illiberal groups (e.g. Islamic fundamentalists) to band together."<sup>13</sup>

This turns out to be the case, with several caveats. To begin with, Islamist totalitarianism<sup>14</sup> has sufficient internal divisions to generate not one camp but three, as listed below. Moreover, some elements do not easily fit in. Assad, while very much in Iran's camp, is neither a Muslim nor much of a believer, let alone an Islamist. Within the forces of stability there is even less ideological coherence. Saudi Arabia has little affinity with the Kurds of Irbil, who belong to the same camp only insofar as they share the same enemies. The PA in Ramallah, by its own definition, is part of the Saudi and Egyptian club – but it is in bitter conflict with Israel, which shares many of the camp's goals.

And yet the sense of ideological affinity, or even more significantly, the acute danger from rival ideological forces, often determines key policy orientations. Above all, it drives the establishment of alliances to fight common enemies. It can even be argued that the PA security cooperation with Israel, despite all that has happened since the summer of 2015, is mainly driven by the camp's collective interest in preventing Hamas from taking power.

Who, then, are the camps, and what are their constituent elements?

## **THE IRANIAN REGIME AND ITS ALLIES**

Still firmly led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (despite repeated reports about his declining health),<sup>15</sup> the present regime in Iran remains highly committed to a revolutionary interpretation of the Shi'a faith. The regime integrates that interpretation with traditional elements of Persian pride, an acute sense of threat from powerful neighbors, and the imperatives of a trading nation dependent on oil markets. It is still driven, as its policy towards Israel reveals, by strong ideological imperatives.

Those imperatives may borrow from old Shi'a templates (undoing a history that went wrong), but they are essentially modern in nature and radically different from traditional concepts of politics and religious hierarchy. Indeed, the Iranian regime's interpretation is rejected by most sources of authority in the Shi'a world.

At its political core is “obedience to the lawgiver,” or Vilayet Faqih, instituted by Khomeini along totalitarian lines. The seemingly democratic procedures involving the election of the president and the Majlis hide the fact that real power remains vested in the office of the Supreme Leader.

In strategic terms, this adds an ideological layer to the familiar, and aggressively pursued, Persian imperial agenda of regional hegemony. Significantly, it associates it with the quest to overthrow the entire post-1945 global order. Even President Rouhani, Iran’s “smiling face”, regularly expresses Iran’s quest to transform the existing balance of power.<sup>16</sup>

This vaulting ambition lends strategic significance to Iran’s pursuit of a nuclear military capacity – a pursuit kept alive, if temporarily mothballed, by the “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” of 2015. A breakout capacity (i.e., the ability to eventually become a military or at least a threshold nuclear power, in support of Iran’s regional and global ambitions) remains within the regime’s reach, with all that implies for regional security and Israel’s long-term survival.

The question of Iran’s exterminatory position on Israel is not and should not be a matter of concern for Israel alone. When Khamenei “tweeted” his case on the “nine ways and reasons to destroy Israel”,<sup>17</sup> he did so in the context of asserting Iran’s global ambitions. The destruction of Israel is to be emblematic of Iran’s transformative role: by implementing its ideological interpretation of the Shi’a faith, it is to achieve what Sunni regimes have failed to accomplish since 1948.

This quest has specific implications. The November 2014 tweet quoted above avers that “powerful confrontation and resolute and armed resistance is the cure of this ruinous regime [Israel]... The West Bank should be armed like Gaza and those who are interested in Palestine’s destiny should take action to arm the people of the West Bank.”

There is no way to do this without first destabilizing Jordan. This would render it a terrorists’ no man’s land, as it was in the late 1960s, that would serve as a conduit through which to arm the Palestinians. By 2015, this imperative was already being translated into Iranian complicity in terror

activities in Jordan.<sup>18</sup> In April 2016, Jordan recalled her ambassador in Tehran to protest Iran's regional subversion.

This occurred against a background of strong reaction on the part of much of the Arab Sunni world to Iran's ambitions, focused since late 2014 primarily on events in Syria and Yemen. These reactions reflect a deep, broad, and justifiable fear. Through the IRGC (al-Quds forces), the Supreme Leader controls an extensive range of subversive and terrorist assets that serve Iran's purposes in the region and beyond. IRGC agents are active across the region and all over the world, from Southeast Asia to Latin America.<sup>19</sup>

Hezbollah remains Iran's most important proxy, and the spread of its current activities indicates the depth of Tehran's investment in sustaining strategic assets beyond Iran's borders. Above all, it has established a formidable military presence in Lebanon – in effect, a large guerilla army, with a highly developed command infrastructure, large fighting formations, and an arsenal that includes some 100,000 rockets, largely aimed at Israeli civilian targets. Hezbollah's capabilities include high quality anti-aircraft, anti-ship and anti-tank missiles.

Nominally a political party and a partner in Lebanon's governing coalition (if "governing" is the right term with which to describe Lebanese political chaos), Hezbollah is in fact in full military control of the country. Lebanon's territory has repeatedly been used by Hezbollah, on Iran's behalf, without even a semblance of asking for authorization.<sup>20</sup> As has been pointed out again and again in Lebanese political debates, Hezbollah's power far outweighs that of any combination of local forces who might challenge it.

In addition to the immense war effort being prepared for ultimate use against Israel, Hezbollah is now actively engaged on three, and perhaps four, other fronts on behalf of Iran's strategic interests and ideological imperatives. Those fronts are:

1. Syria, where it has already taken heavy losses. By Hezbollah's own admission, those losses include its overall military commander in Syria, Mustafa Badr al-Din, killed on 12 May 2016 while fighting rebel forces. Iran's interest in Syria is first and foremost the survival

of Assad's regime and of non-Sunni minorities that Iran views as under her wing. An added dimension is the protection of Sh'ia holy places. There is also an element derived from the commitment to destroying Israel: namely, the effort to establish a significant presence in the Golan, including positions close to the Jordanian border.<sup>21</sup>

2. The Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, where Hezbollah has significant holdings. The group has generally preferred to avoid direct warfare here (for Lebanese sectarian reasons) and has chosen to help the Lebanese Army indirectly in its battles against IS.<sup>22</sup>
3. Iraq, where Hezbollah is significantly supporting Shi'a militias.<sup>23</sup>
4. Yemen, where it apparently helps train Houthi forces. (Accusations have also been made by pro-Saudi Lebanese figures that Hezbollah was involved in training subversive elements in Bahrain and other Gulf states.)<sup>24</sup>

As to Assad's own regime in Syria and its place in Iran's camp, it is true that in some ways this appears to be an unnatural alliance. The Alawites or Nusayris, to whom Assad's clan belongs, are not a Shi'a sect (although some give them the benefit of the doubt). In the eyes of most Muslims, they are a separate, eclectic faith that left the fold of Islam centuries ago.<sup>25</sup> Iran's willingness to treat them as some sort of Sh'ia Muslim faith is an important part of the relationship.

In ideological terms, the Ba'ath party, which was the instrument of the Alawi rise to power, has historically been national-socialist and secular, even anti-clerical, in nature.<sup>26</sup> However, close links were forged by Iran with Bashar's father against a common enemy – Saddam and the Ba'ath branch in Iraq – as well as in common response to Sadat's "defection" and Egypt's peace treaty with Israel. Over time, this became an abiding co-dependence linking the core fighting forces of the Syrian regime with the IRGC and with Hezbollah.

This was made all the more relevant in 2014-15 amidst signs of a possible collapse of the Syrian Armed Forces, particularly after Palmyra fell in May 2015. Still, with Hezbollah and IRGC "boots on the ground" and



significant Russian air support, the regime has been able to hold much of what the French called “la Syrie utile” (useful Syria) and to undo previous reverses. This provides Iran and its proxy with opportunities to increase their stake, particularly in the Golan – a region Iran might wish to use as a base against both Israel and Jordan.

Assad himself probably neither wants nor has the means to regain full control of the rest of Syria. Partition thus seems practically permanent, even if current momentum = enables the regime to improve its position and extend its control to much of what is left of Aleppo and some other rebel-held areas. The reality of partition means, in effect, that both Iran and Hezbollah will continue to be deeply involved in Syria.

While Syria remains Iran’s deepest military investment and the battle there has assumed broad strategic significance, it was the Iranian incursion into Yemen that gave rise to the explosion of mutual anger between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Houthi insurgency taking power in most of Yemen was openly supported by Tehran, and the Saudis saw this as a dagger pointed at the heart of their position in Hijaz and at Islam’s holiest places.<sup>27</sup>

Having earlier conquered the entire north as well as key ports on the Red Sea, the Houthis took over Sana’a in September 2014. In late January 2015 (apparently acting in coordination with former President Ali Abdallah Saleh), they forced President Hadi first to offer them a share of power and new constitutional rights, and then to (temporarily) abdicate. Their military advance towards Aden did, however, trigger a remarkable counter-intervention by a coalition of regional forces led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. (This coalition was joined by Egypt and even by Sudan, which had once worked with the Iranian camp but defected from it on religious, ideological and presumably financial grounds.)

There are well-known religious and cultural differences between the Houthis, who are Zaydi Shi’a “Fivers”, and the Iranians, who are “Twelvers” (the terms refer to the question of who in the line of succession will one day return as the legitimate heir of the Prophet).<sup>28</sup> But this did not prevent the Iranians from making great efforts to support and supply their fellow Shi’a, driven by ideological and religious affinity as well

as the strategic opportunity to put Saudi Arabia at a disadvantage in its own backyard. Several Iranian arms shipments to the warring factions in Yemen have been apprehended, two in March and April 2016 alone, offering concrete proof of Iran's involvement.<sup>29</sup>

Also of great importance to Tehran is its hold on Gaza. Iran maintains this hold two ways: through its "fully owned" proxy Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which used its Iranian-supplied rocket arsenal to try and provoke a conflict in the spring of 2014, then joined the fighting in the summer; and through its ambiguous, complex, and sometimes strained relationship with Hamas itself.

Hamas belongs to another camp, the Muslim Brotherhood, which is in conflict with Iran on Syria (see below). It is nevertheless working hard to rebuild its bridges to Tehran, which was its main supplier of arms and equipment, particularly rocket technology, for many years. (This supply flowed through Sudanese territory and Sinai, thanks to lapses in Egyptian vigilance.)<sup>30</sup>

To this list of assets should be added, if somewhat more tentatively, Iran's extensive influence in the largely Shi'a "rump" state of Iraq (even after Maliki's removal from power).<sup>31</sup> Their main tool there, amidst the partial collapse of the regular Iraqi Army, is the rising significance of the Shi'a militias, al-hashd al-sha'abi, supported by experienced Hezbollah elements.

The degree to which Iran's grip on Iraq has been legitimized reveals the success the Iranian leadership has achieved in using the nuclear agreement to gain acceptance as an "anti-terrorist" force. It also reflects the tendency of some in the West to prioritize the fight against IS over the broader considerations posed by Iran's ambitions.

This brings into focus one of the central policy questions posed by the "game of camps" in the region. Given the terror attacks in Paris and Brussels, and the ugly acts of murder and rape deliberately perpetrated by IS, it is tempting for many in the West to set aside the Iranian challenge (presumably mitigated by the nuclear deal) or even recruit Iran's help on specific battlefields, particularly in Iraq.

This view ignores the size of Iran's population and resources, its advanced industrial base, its ongoing pursuit of strategic capabilities, and its hold on several Arab capitals, notwithstanding Sudan's defection to the Saudi camp. With the rump state in Syria and much of Lebanon firmly in its grip, and with its strong influence in Yemen and Iraq, Iran is by far the most dangerous contender for regional leadership – and the most likely to translate its rising power into a campaign to undo the existing international order.

## **THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD CAMP AND ITS FRIENDS**

The MB, which dates back to the late 1920s, is the oldest branch of the modern Islamist totalitarian tree. It is also the most adept at using the tools of legitimate politics to advance its cause – side by side, on occasion, with violence and subversion. In the 1990s, this duality gave rise to a fierce debate, largely driven by the dramatic turn of events in Algeria, over the true nature of the MB (and the Front of Islamic Salvation). Some saw these groups as social movements responding to real problems of repression and corruption; others saw them as totalitarians in a democratic guise.<sup>32</sup>

The manner in which the MB took and held power in Egypt in 2012-13 essentially left these issues unresolved. The tools of democracy were effectively used, and indeed respected. But the underlying theme was the advancement during Mursi's presidency (which lasted just one day short of a year) of concepts derived from the MB's basic philosophy, which posed a threat not only to Egypt's national interests but to the unique Egyptian identity (*al-hawiyyah al-Masriyyah*). One Egyptian writer described this philosophy as “an assault on Egyptian identity, culture and way of life”.<sup>33</sup>

Millions of Egyptians thus took to the streets on June 30, 2013, followed by a military intervention three days later that removed Mursi from power. This was followed in turn by firm action to repress the MB, culminating in pitched battles at Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyyah. Since then, the MB and its offshoots have suffered further serious setbacks, including al-Nahdha's abdication of power in Tunisia.

The movement nevertheless remains strong under the surface, even in countries where it has been brutally repressed. Moreover, given

Hamas's overt identity as the Palestinian branch of the MB,<sup>34</sup> this camp has a firm hold in Gaza, and can thus use large-scale violence against Israel as a validating factor among Muslims. Hamas, and the MB in general, enjoy the support of two key regional players – Erdoğan's Turkey and the Qatari leadership – assuring that the camp will remain a significant contender in the regional power game. Still, MB-affiliated political parties and underground movements are in trouble across the region and beyond it.

In Egypt, pressure by President Sisi and the “deep state” (the military, the internal security agencies, the judiciary and important parts of the economic establishment) has effectively driven the MB underground and marginalized its political role, although the US and others in the West maintain lines of communication with them. The group's effect was scarcely felt for a long time.

In April 2016, extensive MB-led demonstrations in Cairo against the return of the Tiran and Sanafir Islands to Saudi sovereignty garnered some support from non-Islamist activists. They were used by the MB to portray Sisi as a dictator ready to relinquish Egyptian national rights to ensure his hold on power.<sup>35</sup> This protest quickly lost momentum, however. The Egyptian “deep state” still seems well-positioned to maintain stability and keep up pressure on the MB, the leadership of which is almost entirely incarcerated.

In Tunisia, elections led to the narrow but highly symbolic defeat of Ghanouchi's al-Nahdha. Still, as is the case with al-Adl wal-Ihsan in Morocco, the movement – which is ideologically if not organizationally close to the MB – remains a significant force, the largest in a divided Parliament.

In Tunisia, as in Jordan, a possible way forward would be for the establishment to coopt the Islamists through “partial inclusion”.<sup>36</sup> In some cases, this has proved a more effective way of reducing their impact than methods of repression. (In the case of Egypt, the challenges Sisi faces are quite different from those of the Tunisians or the Hashemite monarchy.)

The situation is even more complex in Libya, where the MB is in effective control of the General National Congress (GNC, known also

as the “National Salvation Government”). In April 2016, it rejected the attempted merger of rival governments, which should have led to national unity, and still holds power in most of Tripolitania. The MB enjoys strong backing from Turkey, which reportedly maintains a significant presence of its secret service, MIT, in MB-controlled areas.

Significant Qatari funding enables the GNC-armed forces, known as the “Libya Dawn” Coalition, to secure the areas under its control as well as a place for the MB in ongoing international efforts to negotiate a unified government. With its independent power base, the MB is in position to withstand the Egyptian-backed military pressure of General Haftar and his attempts to unify Libya.<sup>37</sup>

As to the other MB stronghold – the Hamas regime in Gaza – several factors have converged to reduce its standing, although there are no signs yet of popular resistance to Hamas rule. Despite its boasts, Hamas was militarily weakened by the fighting in 2014, which won them no visible gains. Nor did it serve the MB camp’s larger political purposes. Israel insisted that it be Egypt, and not Hamas’s friends in Ankara and Doha, that controlled the endgame. This preference might have prolonged the fighting, but the regional implications of the question were clear to all involved.

Sisi’s government has consequently been under no constraints, either international or domestic, in applying increasing pressure on Hamas. Well-grounded suspicions about Hamas aiding the “Sinai Province” of IS added to the vehemence of the Egyptians, who cut off the tunnel “industry” from Rafah and took further measures against Hamas. (Its military wing was declared an illegal terror group by Egyptian courts on several occasions in 2014 and 2015.)<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, Israel has been busy pursuing intelligence, operational and technological solutions to Hamas’s most intimidating tool of war: its terror tunnels, which give it the potential to penetrate into Israel and put the residents of border areas at risk. As stated, this led to what Prime Minister Netanyahu described on 18 April 2016 as a “global breakthrough in the ability to locate tunnels.”<sup>39</sup> Coupled with the remarkable performance of the “Iron Dome” rocket and missile defense

systems in 2012 and 2014, this breakthrough might take the edge off Hamas's capacity for effective asymmetrical warfare.

In internal Palestinian terms, the growing rift with Fatah does not seem likely to be bridged anytime soon. Neither Hamas nor the PA leadership has any intention of putting their troops at the other side's tender mercies. Economic woes – and limited follow-up on international donors' promises – feed public discontent. Hence Hamas's efforts to keep alive the hope of an opening that would bolster its standing.

It is at this point that Turkey's position becomes significant. Under Erdoğan, Ankara remains committed to both Hamas and the larger MB camp, although since 2014 the AKP government has found it difficult to translate its formidable power into a position of real influence. Its main lever was the demand for a "lifting of the siege" on Gaza, which would give Hamas both economic hope and access to arms. In effect, this was dropped in the deal leading to the restoration of full relations between Turkey and Israel (it was reduced to the existing arrangements for supply through the Ashdod port).

But Turkey has other priorities. In Syria, Turkey plays a complex role, mainly focused on preventing Kurdish gains. Ankara is also focused on the bitter clash with Egypt in Libya. Hence the willingness in Ankara to settle with Israel on less ambitious terms.

Another troubling aspect of Turkish policy has been the harboring of Hamas terror infrastructure, including the 'Aruri network (suspected of plotting the overthrow of Abbas's government). However, a change in this policy, too (if less explicit) was part of the reconciliation deal with Israel.<sup>40</sup>

For its part, Qatar was obliged to reconsider the style if not the substance of its role in the regional game. Doha came under pressure from other GCC members to change course on Egypt. In 2012-13, Qatar poured billions into the "Mursi project" in Egypt, whereas Saudi Arabia and the UAE did their best to make it fail. Under duress, Qatar committed itself, and its highly influential TV station, al-Jazeera, to be less hostile to Sisi. The Egyptians have yet to be persuaded there has been a real change of mind.

Regardless, the Qataris have been able to sustain their standing in the US, despite voices raised in Washington against their policies.<sup>41</sup> They also have powerful tools of influence in Europe, where their investments range from Volkswagen to FC Barcelona. This keeps them free to support MB-dominated organizations among Muslim communities on that continent, where the movement is building up its presence.<sup>42</sup>

The European scene may indeed play a role in determining the MB's future. With little to show for its efforts in the region beyond Gaza and Tripolitania, the group's attention has turned to Muslim communities in the West, where it poses as a "moderate" alternative to IS. In many cases (including, for example, CAIR in the US), communal organizations have been penetrated or controlled by MB elements.<sup>43</sup> This may yet change: measures in Britain, based on the Jenkins Report, may help constrain the MB, whose formal leadership operates from London.<sup>44</sup> Other Europeans may follow.

## **THE "ISLAMIC STATE" AND OTHER GLOBAL JIHADISTS**

In terms of basic outlook, there are clear similarities between the MB and IS and other Salafi jihadists. They share a vision of a universal Caliphate restored and reject democracy, nationalism and other modern notions of human and political rights.

However, in the 1970s, the MB chose to turn away from terror ( Hamas, which emerged later, is the exception to the rule) and to endorse the tools of party politics, social services and other non-violent means as the road to power. This choice led groups like the Jama'ah and the Jihad in Egypt, forerunners of al-Qaeda and IS, to draw a clear distinction between their way and that of the Ikhwan. Over time, these differences widened sufficiently to define these as two distinct ideological camps, sometimes at each other's throats, sometimes more cooperative, but very different in their modes of action.

With the memory of 9/11 still alive, and with IS striking a deliberately brutal pose as the embodiment of defiant rejection of all human (in their eyes, "western") norms and values, the role of the Salafi-jihadi forces in the public eye – in both the region and in global media – far outweighs

their real strength. Events in the first quarter of 2016 strongly indicate that the jihadist forces are generally in strategic retreat.

This is despite their spectacular actions in Europe, from Paris to Brussels; their role in other terror attacks such as the downing of the Russian plane; and their new hold on significant parts of Libya. The raging struggle in Syria and Iraq is bound to be long and difficult as long as US and allied military actions remain at their present level, but its outcome can be predicted.

The predominant element in this camp or grouping, and the measure of its success or failure, is now indeed the so-called “Islamic State,” led by a professor of Shari’a from Baghdad University – Ibrahim al-Samara’i – who took the name Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and claims to lead the Muslim world. The “state” is often referred to as ISIS, or more accurately ISIL (the SH in “Daesh” stands for Sham, “Greater Syria” or the Levant). It is better described by the shorthand IS, having spread well beyond Iraq and Syria.

This is essentially a venture by former al-Qaeda operatives who seek to revive the Khilafa (Caliphate) abolished by Ataturk in 1927 together with the Ottoman monarchy. Their rapid and alarming rise, culminating in the fall of Mosul; their dramatic use of televised and on-line brutality; and more recently, their horrific attacks in Paris, Brussels and Sinai have placed them at the top of the national security agenda for many in the region and the international community.

But they have proved unequal to the fighting challenge whenever confronted with determined or well-organized military forces, not least in their battles with Kurdish militias in Iraq and Syria. This may well be the best indicator of their future prospects.

The territorial core of IS has come under heavy military pressure from all directions since the last third of 2015: Russian-backed regime troops in Syria, Iranian-backed Shi’a militias in Iraq, and US-backed Kurdish forces in both the KRG (the Kurdish state-in-all-but-name in northern Iraq) and Rojava (the “westlands”, the Kurdish name for their parts of Syria) have been able to push IS back.



Meanwhile, ongoing airstrikes by the US-led coalition, while never rising to a level of intensity commensurate with the expectations generated by heated post-Paris rhetoric, did erode the economic base and command structure of IS.<sup>45</sup> Exporting terror and radicalization to Europe and beyond seems to have emerged as a useful diversionary tactic as IS faces growing pressures, and more significantly, the reduction of its aura of invincibility.

Back in 2014, the quick collapse of the demoralized Iraqi Army gave IS immense momentum. This increased the flow of volunteers (some 1,000 a month) from all over the Muslim world and from the West who hoped to participate in a grand and ruthless military adventure. Once the ride got rougher and IS forces lost much of the ground they had taken, including some Yazidi lands, the mystique began to fray.

This became equally visible in Syria, where IS first suffered a significant reversal at the hands of the YPG, backed by Peshmerga elements and others, in the battle of Kobani (with some support by coalition airstrikes).<sup>46</sup> The Kurds, as might have been expected, fought this battle with little or no support from neighboring Turkey, whose stance towards IS has been ambiguous all along. The Kurds' success against IS in Kobani acquired great symbolic importance. Even if the enclave lacks any strategic significance, IS's failure to take it indicated the limits of its abilities and opened up the prospect of further reverses.

IS is still far from a spent force, and it made renewed advances elsewhere in Syria after Kobani. Early in April 2016, it pushed back Turkish-supported forces and retook the town of al-Rai, foiling Turkish plans to "lead from behind" without Kurdish participation in an offensive against IS.<sup>47</sup> Yet the overall impression is that IS fighters are now increasingly on the defensive on almost all fronts. The retaking of Palmyra by Russian-backed regime forces, as well as other local reverses, indicate IS's loss of both momentum and prestige. Even their makeshift capital, Raqqa, and their most prized possession, Mosul, may soon come under pressure.

Elsewhere, efforts by IS to broaden its influence through the act of "bay'ah" (oath of allegiance) to Baghdadi as Caliph bore fruit in Egypt,

Libya and beyond. In November 2014, the Islamist terror group “Ansar Beit al-Maqdis” in Sinai took the oath and redefined themselves as the “Sinai Province” of IS. With a base of support among disaffected Bedouin tribes, they have shown themselves capable of launching major operations, including massive attacks on Egyptian troops in Sinai in 2015.

Moreover, their raid on an Egyptian missile boat on 12 November 2014 indicates that during the Mursi period, low-ranking officers with Islamist leanings, once purged from the military, had made inroads in combat units.<sup>48</sup> The loss of the Russian airliner on 31 October 2015 could indicate that the same is true in segments of the Egyptian airport services.<sup>49</sup>

The battle in Sinai is still raging, and Egyptian military action, while intensifying, has yet to bear decisive fruit. Further west, in Libya, acts of allegiance in Cyrenaica (Ansar al-Shari’ah and the Shura Council of Young Muslims in Darna) were followed by the spread of IS to Sirt and the western coast. Their brutal act of decapitating 21 Egyptian Copts, captured in Sirt, for no other reason than their Christian faith led to a decision by Egypt to launch dramatic counter action in the form of airstrikes against IS targets.<sup>50</sup>

This, however, turned out to be an isolated effort. The growing presence of IS on a significant segment of the Mediterranean coast is a danger to Europe’s southern arc and to all who have a stake in Mediterranean shipping lanes.<sup>51</sup>

Other, probably less significant acts of bay’ah were recorded in Algeria (Junud al-Khilafa), although the main Islamist elements there have so far avoided this step, and in Mali (the Murabitoun Shura Council), as well as among elements within the Shabaab movement in Somalia.<sup>52</sup> IS has done less well with the Taliban and others in Central Asia.

Reports of bay’ah by Boko Haram in Nigeria are ominous, insofar as they bring together two of the most vicious groups acting in the name of Islam. However, given distance and lack of coherence, it is of limited practical significance. While the Libyan situation poses an active threat, other advances by IS do not necessarily change the balance of power in the game of camps.

The prominence of IS, in any case, has apparently pushed other surviving al-Qaeda elements to assert their presence:

- Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, dislodged by IS in the north and east, has established a significant presence on the Golan border and made gains on the ground in Idlib.
- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has taken advantage of the disintegration of Yemen and holds areas in the south of the country, while the Saudi-led coalition is mainly focused on breaking Houthi power.<sup>53</sup> Their role in the Charlie Hebdo attack, and their subsequent focus on France as a target, served to “keep them in the game” against IS efforts to dominate the Islamist discourse.
- In the Maghreb, the parallel local offshoot of al-Qaeda (AQIM) has been reduced in significance but is still active, with opportunities arising due to the breakup of Libya and political conditions in the Sahel states. While IS claimed credit for a series of terror attacks, mostly targeting tourists, in Tunisia, AQIM elements (and independent local groups such as the GIA) remained the dominant presence among radical Islamists in Algeria and Morocco. An interesting report recently carried by Moroccan media raised the prospect of reconciliation between IS and AQIM and the setting up of a “Saharan Islamic Emirate” in the border area between both countries. This would serve as a basis for the “Gibraltar Province” and the future “re-conquest” of Spain and France.<sup>54</sup> The rationale may come from the lands of fantasy, but the prospect for cooperation is quite real, as it has been in Paris and elsewhere.

## **THE "FORCES OF STABILITY"**

It may not be entirely accurate to describe this disparate group as an ideological camp. But led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which have taken dramatic measures to tighten their relationship in recent months including a visit by King Salman to Cairo, a wide and varied group of forces now finds common cause in directly facing the other three camps (albeit with different degrees of hostility).

The list includes, in some respects, both Israel and the Palestinian Authority (as well as Kurdish secularists, Saudi Wahhabists, and Arab leaders as diverse as King Abdullah II of Jordan and President Bashir of Sudan). It can hardly be said to be of one cloth, but the differences are overshadowed by the magnitude of the threat.

This is a “camp,” in other words, defined more by what it rejects (Islamist bids for power, in their various forms and colors) and by what frightens it (above all, the sense that American policy leaves them exposed to danger, with the Obama administration all too eager to accommodate both Iran and the MB) than by what it endorses as a vision for the future. On some issues, such as the prospect of Assad’s survival in power in what is left of Syria, there are profound disagreements even among closely aligned players, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Israel’s position in particular is still delicate, at least in public. Arab leaders might acknowledge and even laud Israel’s contributions to regional security in private conversations with US and other western interlocutors. But they are wary of offering any indication of “normalization” in public – even if President Sisi’s speech on 17 May 2016 can be read as an indication of his interest in a new dynamic that would make relations with Israel less problematic.

And yet the intensity and urgency of the challenges, with their ideological as well as geopolitical dimensions, are enough to bring these “strange bedfellows” into a functional grouping with a shared strategic purpose. This translates into specific measures of cooperation. While some aspects of this emerging cohesion are quite conspicuous, like King Salman’s visit to Cairo, other are, and will remain, discreet.

In Egypt, Sisi has moved to stabilize the economy, showing the courage and political strength necessary to reduce subsidies and seek a solution to energy problems. So far, he enjoys broad if fragile public support, even if his decision on the islands gave his opponents the new rallying cry that he was “selling” Egypt’s patrimony. His government is fighting a heavy battle in Sinai, with forces well above the treaty numbers agreed to with Israel.

Ultimately, it is the MB – not Iran, nor even IS – that is at the top of Sisi’s strategic priorities, both domestically and beyond Egypt’s borders. He

offered firm support to the legitimate Libyan government and its forces under General Haftar, which was fighting a rival MB government. Sisi's priorities are also reflected in his sympathy towards Assad's survival in power, given the MB affiliations of some of the Syrian rebels.

Sisi's enemies list reads MB first, IS second, and Iran third. For the Gulf states and for Israel, that list is upside down. Still, there are ample commonalities beyond the painfully obvious need for economic help and investment that explain Sisi's strategic rationale for intensively engaging with the Saudis, even to the extent of restoring their rights in Tiran and Sanafir.

A transformative change can be discerned in Saudi Arabian conduct in the region. It is safe to assume that this intensity is largely due to the Saudis' growing realization that they can no longer rely on US policy to deliver for them. The "Camp of Stability's" new, different edge can be most vividly discerned in the fighting in Yemen, as well as in the Arab League's designation of Hezbollah as a terror organization – an act that would have been unthinkable not long ago.

Following the smooth transition to King Salman, the contours of a future transfer of power to the next generation are beginning to emerge, with the King's energetic son, Muhammad (MBS), taking the lead in shaping the family's assertive foreign policy. He has shown himself ready to use the costly strategic tool of "the spigot" – increasing oil production to bring prices down. This is a capability unique to Saudi Arabia as the "swing producer."

The spigot was apparently chosen, despite the immense cost in revenue, in order to put great pressure on the Iranian economy, both in the context of the P5+1 negotiations and in response to the Houthi gains in Yemen. As indicated above, the Saudis see those gains as an Iranian invasion aimed at their heartland.

However, the Saudis' limited impact in Yemen so far and their failure to field effective opposition forces against Assad in Syria raise questions about their ability to implement a coherent regional agenda. Egypt is too preoccupied and does not share the camp's agenda when it comes to the fate of Assad.

This lends particular importance to the position of Jordan. It is a small country of limited resources, but in many ways it is the cornerstone of the camp, and a crucial base against IS. The King seems to take pride in his position as the West's most loyal friend in the region while calling for more economic help.<sup>55</sup>

Jordanian stability and security, to which Israel actively contributes by facilitating economic cooperation, is therefore essential. It drives Israeli policy on a range of issues, from water supply to energy (including plans for gas exports) to truck traffic from Turkey to work permits in Eilat. Above all, cooperation against terror and subversion has risen to higher levels, a necessity in view of the nature of the threat.

Israel is obviously a like-minded force for stability, a key member of the camp. Yet for obvious reasons, it remains in a highly informal and even secretive position. Its presence is usually made manifest only indirectly. There is, for example, a common thread that unites Egypt, Greece and Cyprus as well as a parallel relationship between Israel and her two Hellenic neighbors in the eastern Mediterranean. Israel's position is also reflected in the steady efforts made by her friends in Washington to secure economic and even military assistance for Jordan and Egypt.<sup>56</sup>

Overt and direct relations, let alone open consultation among all like-minded regional players, are still a long way off. Nonetheless, the stakes make such considerations secondary. Egyptian economic collapse, let alone a takeover by hostile ideological forces, is enough to dwarf all other worries.

A paradox thus arises as to where to place the PA leadership under Abbas within this camp. The most reliable litmus test of ideological orientation, in recent years, has been the manner in which various players reacted to President Mursi's overthrow. In this light, Israel and the PA were very much on the same side: both rejoiced to see the MB removed from power. More recently, as tensions flared up between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it did not take long for Abbas to make it very clear where he stood – again, with the forces of stability. Speaking in Bethlehem on January 6, 2016, he said three times, “We stand with Saudi Arabia”.<sup>57</sup>

This may carry some practical implications. As regional tensions escalated, Abbas – despite giving moral support to the ongoing terror wave – chose several times to reject advice to break off security cooperation with Israel. After all, had he taken that step, it would have been easier for either Hamas (MB), IS, or an Iranian proxy to use the ensuing chaos to grab power.

The logic of common threat that keeps the Israeli and Palestinian security forces on the same side has its own limits. The gaps were revealed over the Temple Mount issue. Whereas Jordan, in an effort to restore calm, offered to install cameras and monitor events, the Palestinian side kept raising objections, ultimately sapping Jordan's patience (it scrapped the scheme).<sup>58</sup>

This deliberate undermining of stability is part of a pattern. Despite their identification with the broader camp, the Palestinians regularly put their grievances front and center. They refused to work within the “Kerry Framework,” and the temptation to replace tough negotiations with a fantasy promise of an imposed solution has driven them into a dangerous confrontational mode. It has also led to attempts to cross camp lines and reach an unworkable partnership with Hamas.

Further afield, the “Camp of Stability” can be said to include all the Gulf monarchies except Qatar; the areas of Libya under the present “legitimate” government (militarily backed by Egypt and the UAE); Tunisia, facing multiple challenges but representing the prospects of healthy political evolution; Algeria (once revolutionary, now conservative in outlook); and Morocco, another monarchy that has done well against subversive forces.

The Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq, and some Kurdish elements in Syria, acting in pursuit of their own long term goals, can be said to be associated with the camp insofar as they are also committed to resisting Iranian pressure, rejecting Turkey's regional strategy, and actively standing against IS (indeed, they have done much of the fighting on the ground). Their pro-Western orientation adds an additional dimension. Similar points can be made, in a different context, about Azerbaijan. In a sense, the European nations of the eastern Mediterranean – Greece and Cyprus, which have stakes of their own in these regional struggles – can also be defined as external allies of the camp of stability.

## GREAT POWER REACTIONS: THE BROKEN ARC OF HISTORY

In essence, the current version of the “game of camps” is dominated by internal imperatives in the region itself (unlike the old days of the Cold War, when US and Soviet influences were paramount). Still, three different types of intervention did leave their mark on the balance of power and the dynamics of conflict, although the consequences were all too often different from those the international players had envisaged.

American input: The original hopes pinned by both sides of the American political aisle on the so-called “Arab Spring” were very much in line with the American belief in the power and value of the quest for freedom and democracy. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice put it forcefully in the concluding chapter of her memoirs:

“...my own experiences affirm that “history has a long arc,” and I do believe that “it bends towards justice.” ...The United States has a view of how human history ought to unfold. In 1776 we claimed our inalienable rights and insisted on their universality... The events of the Arab Spring have vindicated the belief in the universality of our values.”<sup>59</sup>

What seemed plausible to Rice and many others when she wrote these words in 2011 seems bitterly out of touch with events as they unfolded. So does her expectation that if elected, radical Islamists “will have to answer questions about individual rights and religious freedom and about the role of women”.<sup>60</sup>

Similar assumptions – in fact, similar language – emerged as the Obama administration responded to the dramatic events in the region. The president, often used the same phrase about the arc of history.<sup>61</sup> In his stern warning to the Egyptian regime not to use force against the demonstrators at Tahrir Square, he helped put in motion the destabilizing energies that translated the protests into a political upheaval.

Obama went a step further. What to Rice seemed a temporary twist in the tale of democracy – Islamist parties like the MB taking power through the ballot box, only to be swept away soon enough by public anger – struck Obama and his administration as a useful strategic expedient against more radical enemies such as al-Qaeda (and, today, IS).



Thus, in the game of camps, the forces of stability found themselves sidetracked and at times betrayed by an American policy that saw merit in engaging with Erdoğan, with Mursi, and after the nuclear deal, even with the Iranian regime. The US viewed these figures as legitimate players in the regional game, even urging its traditional friends to adjust to new realities and find ways to share power in the region with those they saw as their deadly enemies.<sup>62</sup>

This sense of uncertainty about American support has been one of the consolidating elements of the “Camp of Stability.” With the American decisions not to attack the Assad regime, and then to cut a problematic deal with Iran, uppermost in their mind as proof that the US can no longer be relied upon, the members of the camp saw a growing need to stand shoulder to shoulder in an increasingly dangerous region.

One exception to the Americans’ inclination to walk away from old commitments has been their ongoing effort to defeat IS. The US-led coalition has inflicted serious damage on IS infrastructure, killed significant commanders, and helped local forces push IS elements back. This may well intensify in 2016 and beyond, although American language about “destroying” IS has become more restrained. Still, as General David Petraeus recently emphasized, much more needs to be done: “The Long War is going to be an ultra-marathon, and it is time we recognized that.”<sup>63</sup>

The Russian intervention: Limited in scope, but spectacularly effective (and hence a rebuke to the West’s more half-hearted actions), Putin’s intervention in support of Assad’s survival in Syria – a decision he reached in the third quarter of 2015, when serious reverses seemed to put the rump regime state in real danger – made a real difference. In practical terms, it was a major contribution to the war efforts of the Iranian camp. Coupled with the supply of advanced air defense systems to Iran, it raised the question whether Russia is in fact committed to the success of this camp at the expense of the three others.

After all, the forces of stability, led by the Saudis, have always been America’s friends – and Russia’s competitors in the energy markets. (Their present strategy of flooding the world with cheap oil is particularly

destructive from a Russian point of view.) The MB, largely due to its meddling in Chechnya and the Caucasus, has long been on Moscow's list of terror organizations (although Hamas is mysteriously excluded). Relations with Turkey have seen ups and down largely as a function of Turkish support for MB subversion. As for IS, there is no reason to doubt that Russia does genuinely share the wish to see them destroyed, even if the main thrust of Russian airstrikes in Syria has been directed at Assad's other enemies.

Does all of this amount to a Russian commitment to the Iranian camp? As has been argued elsewhere, there are reasons to answer in the negative.<sup>64</sup> Moscow neither shares nor likes Iran's intention to use Syria as a point of departure for further adventures. In this respect, Putin's decision to engage with Israel in airforce-to-airforce deconfliction over Syrian skies implicitly accepts the legitimacy of Israeli concerns about supplies to Hezbollah.

With little or no tolerance for Islamist subversion of any kind, Russia can be an ally of the Camp of Stability if the question of Assad's survival can be set aside. This is clearly indicated by the growing warmth of Moscow's relations with Cairo. At the same time, their interest in the Gulf region may differ: it would cause Moscow no distress to see Iran displace the US as a dominant player there.

International mediation: The third type of input is the series of attempts by the UN and the international community to alleviate the consequences of the collapse of states, reconcile warring camps, and offer opportunities for political solutions to internal conflict in recent years. All too often, these attempts have been an ineffectual and sad substitute for effective action by the US or the West, as the horrors continued to multiply on all fronts.

In Syria, Staffan de Mistura – an Italian-Swedish diplomat with a long history of UN service – has been acting since July 2014 to promote his idea of local “freezes” in the fighting, providing some relief to beleaguered populations and paving the way for the broader efforts (the “Geneva process”) led jointly by the US and Russia. His work met with limited success, but in and of itself served to mitigate the effects of international

de-legitimization of the Assad regime and create the condition for the grudging acceptance of the reality of partition in Syria.

In Libya, the work done by UN mediators – first Bernardino Leon, and since November 2015, the German diplomat Martin Cobler – has at least offered a template for possible reconciliation, so that the legitimate (pro-Egyptian) government and the “rebel” (MB) regime in Tripoli could join hands in fighting IS. But so far, implementation has run into difficulties again and again. Without major international intervention, made necessary by the growing danger of IS along the coast, these efforts are unlikely to bear fruit.

In Yemen, given the intensity of the Saudi-led assaults (mainly airstrikes) on Houthi-held areas, the mediation by Ismail Ould Sheikh Ahmed, a Mauritanian diplomat acting as Secretary General Ban’s special envoy, has in fact led to talks in Kuwait. The Houthi delegates wish to prove that they are not Iran’s proxies and that national reconciliation might be possible. This may reduce the intensity of the battle, but it also serves to make an Islamist insurgency a legitimate partner to a political solution, with broad implications for the regional balance of power as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

Efforts to reduce the intensity of fighting on several fronts of the “game of camps” may alleviate some of the suffering, but the ideological divides are too deep to be bridged. In the case of IS, decisive action is needed to further degrade it to the point that the game will be reduced to a three-way contest. In the case of the MB, unless they gain unexpected political victories or use communities in the West to shift the balance of power, it would seem likely that it too is destined to decline (but remain a strategic irritant).

As recent events indicate, the crucial factor for the future of the region will thus continue to be the power struggle – both geopolitical and ideological (and in some aspects, confessional) in nature – between the forces of stability, which seek a place in the existing global order, and the Iranian challenge, which is driven by an ideological urge (dressed up in religious garb) to overthrow it. Specifically, Iran’s object is to undermine the post-

1945 dispensation, which includes the right of self-determination for the Jewish people. The wish to undo Israel – inexplicable in terms of Iranian *raison d'état*, but central to the revolution's *raison d'être* – will thus remain central to Tehran's purposes, and those of her "camp," as long as the present regime stays in power.

Israel's position is therefore of growing importance in this struggle, and will increasingly influence her standing in the region. Ultimately it will still be the input of the international community and, above all, the next American administration that will determine the long-range outcome in the game of camps.

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