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The Contest for Regional Leadership in the New Middle East

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Cover Image

Free Syrian Army fighters pose on a tank, which they say was captured from the Syrian army loyal to President Bashar al-Asad, after clashes in Qasseer, near Homs on November 19, 2012.

(REUTERS/Sham News Network/Handout)

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In addition to the historic political change occurring within the major states of the Middle East, there is a transformative process underway remaking the dynamics among the states of the region. The reordering of the geopolitics of the region has exposed rivalries among the contenders for leadership, as well as different ideological, economic, nationalistic and sectarian agendas. This jostling for leadership is occurring in part because regional decisionmakers have concluded that the American commitment to the Middle East is waning. Turkey, Qatar, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have sought to establish themselves as regional leaders, wading into conflicts like Syria's civil war with funding and weapons and seeking to influence the trajectory of Egyptian and Bahraini politics. For all their efforts, these would-be leaders have rarely achieved their goals. Instead, they have fueled violence, political conflict and polarization, deepening the endemic problems in the countries that they have sought to influence. In the midst of this regional transformation, which will produce a variety of outcomes in different countries, is the United States. Washington has sought to accommodate these changes in a way that continues to secure its strategic interests. What role the United States will play in a "new Middle East" is the subject of intense debate among Americans, Arabs and Turks. Nevertheless, it is clear that with all the problems regional powers have confronted trying to shape the politics of the region, American leadership will continue to be indispensable.

The idea that the United States is leaving the region is widespread. Stinging critiques of American policy and charges that the Obama administration has failed to lead can be read and heard across the Middle East.¹ This perception in the region is understandable. After the failed project in Iraq and more than a decade of conflict in Afghanistan, the American people have expressed their exhaustion with the military engagements of the 2000s. This public sentiment, combined with the realities

of a fiscal environment in which leaders of both political parties have placed a premium on cutting budgets, has sent a signal to the people and the leaders of the Middle East that the U.S. government will not be in the business of military interventions. At the same time, the Obama administration implicitly recognizes the limits of American influence in the high-stakes struggles occurring in the region and – for separate reasons – has publicly expressed a desire to rebalance its global political, diplomatic and military resources, with a particular focus on the Pacific Rim. These developments have prompted accusations from Middle Eastern leaders and elites that Washington is “turning its back” on the region.

Finally, the loose talk in the United States about “energy independence” has raised doubts among many Middle Eastern leaders – particularly the Saudis – about the durability of the United States’ commitment to Gulf security.² The oil market is a global one, and Washington’s interest in stable prices will require a continued commitment to the security of the Persian Gulf. Despite this economic reality, however, political parties, the natural gas industry and proponents of alternative energy sources have sought to frame the benefits of hydraulic fracturing (known as “fracking”) and other technologies as a way of extricating the United States from the Middle East and avoiding future conflicts there.

Within many Middle Eastern capitals, concern about U.S. plans to abandon the region are paired with criticism that U.S. policy is increasingly weak and feckless anyway. There are long-running criticisms of Washington’s handling of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, as well as newer complaints about the deterioration of the Iraqi security situation. From a particular Arab – and Israeli – perspective, Hosni Mubarak’s fall, the protracted nature of Syria’s civil war, Libya’s potential disintegration and Iran’s continued drive for nuclear technology all represent

American leadership failures. There remains a belief, for example, that through some undefined type of support, the United States could have forestalled the ignominious end of Mubarak’s almost 30-year-long rule. American reluctance to intervene militarily in Syria is also a point of contention for its Arab and Turkish allies, who believe that Washington has missed an opportunity to stem Iranian influence in what has become an arc from Tehran to Beirut. In the eyes of regional contenders and the Israelis, the United States has consistently failed to appreciate the extent and depth of Tehran’s malevolent intent in the region.

As a result of these views, Washington’s regional allies have come to the conclusion that they are essentially on their own. Their subsequent effort to shape the Middle East to their own specific geopolitical needs and benefits has only intensified rivalries among the Qataris, Turks, Saudis, Emiratis and Iranians, and it has had a deleterious effect in various arenas – notably Egypt and Syria – where this competition is playing out.

Conceptualizing Leadership

For the better part of the last two decades – coinciding with the success of Operation Desert Storm and the end of the Soviet Union – the United States has been the predominant power in the Middle East. Beginning in the early 1990s, Washington had no competitor or peer in the region – or the world, for that matter – and as a result, the United States had the ability to drive events in the Middle East. None of the countries currently vying for regional leadership has the kind of power or resources that the United States possessed two decades ago, but they are seeking to shape the politics of neighboring countries, to compel both allies and adversaries to take certain actions and to extend their military, political and diplomatic influence beyond their own borders to secure their interests.

The regional contenders for leadership fall into various camps: Turkey and Qatar are populist

champions that have embraced demands for change around the Middle East, while others, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are defenders of the status quo, pursuing a more defensive approach amid fears that change in major countries, notably Egypt, will necessarily compromise their influence and threaten their security. Iran is quite clearly a revisionist power, seeking a transformation of the region in an effort to extend its influence to the western shore of the Persian Gulf and beyond to the Mediterranean.

Each of these countries confronts a series of structural and political obstacles that make it difficult to compel others to submit to its leadership.

Of course, these categories do not always capture the behavior of these states. Whether “populist champions” or “status quo defenders” or “revisionists,” they have often proven to be inconsistent in their efforts to reshape the region’s politics. Riyadh is widely regarded as the primary financial supporter of counterrevolutionary forces in Egypt and Bahrain. But it has also been instrumental in supporting revolutionary groups that have sought to overthrow Bashar al-Asad in Syria, and it played a crucial role in removing Yemen’s former leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh, from power. Still, the Saudi leadership’s overall strategy is to shape and defend a regional order friendly to Saudi Arabia, which is some version of the status quo. In Egypt, Riyadh sees the specter of the Muslim Brotherhood’s version of political Islam as a threat to domestic peace.

Yet, in Syria, the Saudis consider Sunni Islamist groups a potential counterforce to Iran’s proxies. The apparent inconsistency of supporting Bahrain’s ruling family and Syrian revolutionaries is no contradiction at all in the context of Riyadh’s overall interest in containing Tehran.

Despite their efforts to use soft power and financial, diplomatic and military means to order the Middle East to their own ends, the Turks, Qataris, Iranians, Saudis and Emiratis are likely to find that they have neither the resources nor a compelling vision to help achieve their goals. Indeed, the changes in the region and the uncertainty they are producing do not entirely benefit any of the regional contenders for power. Each of these countries confronts a series of structural and political obstacles that make it difficult to compel others to submit to its leadership.

The Failure of a Populist Champion

The guiding principle of Turkish foreign policy for much of the era of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been the widely discussed “zero problems” approach to its neighbors, especially in the Middle East. Under this policy, which is closely associated with Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey sought to secure its interests – prosperity and regional power – by settling its disputes with nearby nations, as well as solving disagreements among them. Turkey could realize its goals only if it helped forge an environment where Arabs and Israelis were at peace, Iraq was unified, Iran was persuaded not to develop nuclear weapons technology, Damascus looked to Ankara instead of Tehran for political, diplomatic and military support and sources of energy for Turkey were secure. The result was the emergence of Turkey as a regional troubleshooter and mediator.

Of all the contenders for regional leadership, Turkey seemed to be best positioned to leverage demands for change around the Middle East to its geostrategic and political benefit. The Justice

and Development Party under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan projected a positive image of a liberalizing, Islamist-led political system and rapidly developing economy. Prime Minister Erdogan's position on Palestine, particularly Gaza, and his willingness to censure Israel publicly only added to Turkey's popularity in the Arab world. When it came to the Arab uprisings, Erdogan was the first world leader to call on Hosni Mubarak to leave office, which reinforced the idea among Arabs and American policymakers that the AKP's leaders had, for historical and cultural reasons, special insight into the Middle East. Ankara insisted to its primary diplomatic partners, the United States and Europe, that it could play a unique role in assuring soft landings in the region. Although reluctant to use the term, the Turkish leadership believed that the AKP era was a "model" for the Arab world.³

Even before the changes that the uprisings wrought, Turkey sought to position itself as a regional leader in an additional area: containing Iran's influence – though not in the way that the United States and Ankara's other Western allies would have liked. The Turkish relationship with Iran has long been fraught. Competitive empires gave way to similar radically secularizing state projects before the two countries returned to rivalry after the revolution in Iran and the emergence of the clerical regime. Turkish concerns over Iran's revolutionary ideology did not inhibit successive Turkish governments from exploring an energy relationship with Tehran beginning in the 1990s. However, in the aftermath of Israel's war with Hezbollah in 2006, when the popularity of figures such as Hassan Nasrallah and then-Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad spiked temporarily in the region, Turkish leaders sought to peel away some of Tehran's prestige. They took a variety of populist positions on the Palestinian issue and relations between the Muslim world and the West, all while evincing an overall approach to foreign

policy that emphasized Muslim solidarity. Erdogan and his advisors believed that the Arab world and Turkey had for too long surrendered leadership on these issues to Iran. According to Turkish officials at the time, Ankara under the AKP had an opportunity to appropriate these issues to weaken Iran's influence. The dramatic strengthening of ties between Turkey and Syria was part of this strategy. Erdogan had a number of reasons to make a political and diplomatic investment in Assad – including the attendant economic benefits to Turkey of having direct access to Syria, Jordan and the Gulf beyond – but drawing Damascus away from Tehran was also important in the Turkish bid for regional leadership.

For a time, this policy seemed to pay off for the AKP's leaders – both at home and abroad. Erdogan became the most respected leader in the Middle East, while Ankara positioned itself as regional mediator, troubleshooter and even mentor.⁴ The Turks believed in the power of their own "model" to transform the Arab world. Within the region, many people were receptive to Erdogan's Turkey. Islamists like Egypt's Muslim Brothers, who had previously voiced reservations about the AKP, now sought to fashion their own parties after it, and young Arab activists declared that Turkey – unlike Saudi Arabia or Iran – had something to offer them. For business leaders, the world's 16th-largest economy was a source of badly needed investment and a compelling vision of what the future could be.

As much as Turkey's activist foreign policy had raised Ankara's profile in the region, there were limits to Arab receptivity to the exercise of Turkish power.⁵ Ankara overvalued its soft power, overestimated its cultural affinities with the Arab world and miscalculated the legacy of the Ottoman Empire in the region. After the Arab uprisings, Ankara's regional diplomacy did not produce any substantial results, even though the Turkish foreign minister made six visits to Egypt in 2011. Tunisia's

Islamists spoke warmly of their friendship with and respect for Erdogan, but the trajectory of Tunisian politics shows no evidence of Turkish influence.⁶ Relations between Ankara and Baghdad soured, primarily due to Iraq's prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, and for the Gulf states, Turkey was a place to invest, not a strategic partner.

In Syria (discussed in detail below), despite all of Ankara's patronage of Assad, Turkish leaders were unable to convert their financial, political and diplomatic investment into influence or leverage with the regime. Subsequently, the Turks – like all other regional actors – have had little success managing the Syrian opposition. In general, the Arab world was simply not willing to submit to Turkish leadership. Ankara's position diminished further after the coup d'état in Egypt in July 2013. Prime Minister Erdogan's vocal criticism of the Egyptian military, demand that Mohammed Morsi be returned to the presidential palace and political support for the Muslim Brotherhood made sense in the context of Turkish domestic politics, but these moves soured Ankara's relations with Cairo.⁷ Erdogan, who was once welcomed in Egypt as a hero, is now reviled among many Egyptians.⁸ Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood has rankled the Saudis and Emiratis, who have bankrolled the Egyptians since the coup.

Finally, Turkey's Middle Eastern mystique was based in part on the liberalization of the Turkish political system. The rollback of democratic reforms, which began even before the uprisings, has taken a toll on Turkish prestige. Turkey loses its appeal as a model for Arabs who want to live in more open and democratic societies when its leaders are imprisoning journalists; allowing police brutality and crony capitalism to continue unchecked; pressuring nongovernmental organizations; criminalizing the use of social media; carrying out mass purges of the bureaucracy; and attacking the judicial branch. Prime Minister

Erdogan's use of tactics similar to those that recently deposed Arab dictators used against their own populations has contributed to Ankara's problematic relations with the Arab world.

Overall, Turkey's strategic position in the region has deteriorated markedly in the last year. Ankara now has difficult relations with Baghdad, Cairo, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and, of course, Damascus, not to mention Jerusalem. It has sought improved relations with Tehran, consistent with Washington's negotiations with the Iranians over their nuclear program, but it remains fundamentally at odds with Iran over Syria and Iraq. Turkey is turning inward, anyway. Having written themselves out of a substantial regional leadership role, the Turks are now consumed with a suddenly uncertain and polarized domestic political environment.

Containing Qatar's Ambitions

Turkey has not been the only populist champion vying for regional leadership. Long before the emergence of the Justice and Development Party, Qatar sought to leverage its vast wealth for influence beyond the country's small size. Under Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Qataris established themselves as unlikely populists. Doha's willingness to step beyond the Arab consensus on a variety of regional issues, its outspoken calls for political reform in the Arab world well before the uprisings around the region and its wildly popular Al Jazeera network – with its thinly veiled Islamist sympathies and unfettered coverage of Arab politics – made Qatar a force in the region.⁹ This reflected the Qatari leadership's core interest: establishing and reinforcing the country's independence from its larger neighbors, specifically Saudi Arabia. This has become the *sine qua non* of Doha's approach to the region. Doha's other interests include the continued flow of energy resources from the Gulf – Qatar sits atop the world's third largest deposits of natural gas, which is the source of its great wealth – and the preservation of Al Thani rule, which is buttressed through strategic

ties with the United States and the presence of a large American air base and forward command center west of Doha.¹⁰

The Qatari approach to the region carries considerable risk, which was brought into sharp relief after mass demonstrations and a military intervention brought down Egypt's President Morsi in July 2013. The Qataris had clearly miscalculated in Egypt, assuming that Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood had staying power. Doha was within the mainstream of Arab and Western thinking about the region, but Qatar created the impression that it was principally the patron of the Brotherhood rather than seeking to assist Egypt and Egyptians more broadly. This episode and its aftermath have taken a toll on Qatar's prestige. In the demonstrations that helped bring Morsi's presidency to an end, it was no surprise that Egyptians burned American and Israeli flags, but they also vented their anger at Doha by burning the Qatari colors as well. In Syria, Qatari policy, which ranges from financial support for outside opposition groups to military support for various militias and extremist groups, does not have the same anti-Iranian quality that drives the Saudi approach to the conflict. Rather, Qatar's approach to the Syrian uprising is consistent with its efforts to buy influence in post-Mubarak Egypt or post-Moammar Gadhafi Libya. They have not been successful, however. Qatari largesse has failed to unite Syria's disparate opposition groups, and Assad remains in power in Damascus.¹¹

Qatar's regional reversals, especially in Egypt, have provided an opportunity for the Saudis and Emiratis to apply significant pressure on Doha. In March 2013, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Manama announced that they were recalling their ambassadors from Qatar over Doha's refusal to implement a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) agreement barring any member from harboring individuals or groups that would do harm to another member. The recall was in response to

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the refuge that Doha has offered to members of the Muslim Brotherhood, especially those from fellow GCC states.¹² A month later, media reports indicated that an agreement had been reached to settle the row, in which Doha allegedly agreed to stop the media campaign against GCC members; bowed to pressure to expel members of the Muslim Brotherhood; refrained from supporting the Shia Houthis in northern Yemen; and pledged to stop naturalizing citizens of other Gulf countries.¹³ Neither Qatar's new emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, nor any other Qatari official has indicated his assent to this agreement, which would amount to submitting to the Saudis' will and thereby reversing two decades of Qatari foreign policy.¹⁴ As a result, it is unlikely that Doha will agree to the deal, portending continued divisions within the Gulf. Qatar will be able to resist the pressure of its neighbors, but the entire episode, going back to the events in Egypt in the summer of 2013, demonstrates the limits of the primary resources – money and media – that underlie Doha's bid for regional leadership.

'Resistance' Rollback

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has sought to position itself as the vanguard for Islamist governance across the Muslim world and the champion of "resistance" to the West and Israel. At brief moments in the last 35 years, Tehran did capture the attention of the Arab world. Immediately after

the establishment of the Islamic Republic, for example, Arab Islamists looked upon Iran as an inspiration for their own societies. Iran's support for a variety of groups fighting Israel – including Islamic Jihad and Hamas – has also given it a reservoir of credibility among Arabs. Tehran's popularity reached a peak during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. Since that time, Iran's appeal has waned and its strategic position has not improved.

By removing Saddam Hussein from power, the American invasion of Iraq proved to be a significant strategic benefit to Iran, extending their influence to Baghdad, which had once been a counterweight to Tehran's regional ambitions. Iran believed that it could build on this advantage as a result of the Arab uprisings, which threatened a regional order that was friendly to the exercise of American power. Try as the Iranians might to portray the downfalls of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Mubarak, Saleh and Gadhafi, as well as the instability in Bahrain, as an “Islamic Awakening,” protesters in various squares around the Arab world were not demanding an Iranian-style theocracy, but rather more open, just and democratic societies. The fact that Islamist parties made significant initial gains had nothing to do with Iran.¹⁵

Also, two of the three states Iran considers most important to its interests in the region, Syria and Iraq, are wracked with violence. The third, Lebanon, confronts a range of political challenges, as well as bloodshed spilling over from the Syrian conflict. The Asad regime requires substantial resources from Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah. Even if the war's current trajectory in favor of the Asad regime continues, the conflict will likely drag on for several more years, complicating Iranian power projection in the region and straining Iran's financial, military and intelligence resources.

Iran's support for the Syrian leadership, which has enabled the killing of 160,000 people and made millions refugees, has gravely damaged Tehran's claim to be a regional leader that transcends sect and nationality. The clerical regime's nuclear ambitions – and the willingness of the Obama administration to negotiate with Tehran over the nuclear issue – have led to closer security cooperation among Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait to counter Iran. This has taken on a variety of forms, including massive infusions of money to stabilize Egypt, arms and financing for Lebanon, military intervention in Bahrain, support for groups fighting the Syrian government and a robust propaganda campaign. As a result, popular Arab approval of Iran has plummeted in recent years.¹⁶ The slide in Tehran's popularity should not overshadow a basic problem with its bid to lead the region. As a large, predominantly Persian and Shia country whose leaders espouse a revisionist worldview, Iran has acted as regional spoiler.¹⁷ That role is not likely to change.

A Saudi and Emirati Moment?

The Middle East is undergoing a period of Saudi and Emirati ascendancy. This is not to suggest that their collective approach to the myriad problems confronting the region is wise or that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi will be successful everywhere they seek to shape the region – Syria being a glaring example of failure. Yet both countries working in concert or in parallel have demonstrated an ability to influence developments in ways that no other contender for regional power and influence has. In general, the interests of the Saudis and Emiratis track closely: stability in the Gulf region and in their respective countries, containment of Iranian power and stable energy prices.

Some analysts in the Gulf believe that Saudi and Emirati policy is based on “panic” over a regional atmosphere in which threatening versions of political Islam surround them, Iranian power is unchecked and the United States has turned its

back on longtime regional allies. Whether the result of panic or not, King Abdullah and the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, have responded with a rational and coherent policy to confront the twin – and in places interrelated – challenges of Iran and Islamist movements in an environment where they perceive American leadership to be absent.

In Bahrain, the effective deployment of money and military forces has fortified the ruling Khalifa family as a bulwark against Iranian meddling in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. The unwillingness of the West, particularly the United States, to intervene in Syria and effectively break the Asad-Tehran-Hezbollah axis has convinced the Saudis to equip the Lebanese armed forces as a way of squeezing Riyadh's adversaries. Saudi and Emirati pressure on Qatar (discussed above) is intended to roll back the gains that the Muslim Brothers and related Islamist movements made after uprisings around the region. Both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have used financial pressure to force Turkey's prime minister to end his public and vociferous criticism of Egypt's coup and the subsequent political process, though the Qatari-funded and Brotherhood-run Rabaa TV continues to broadcast from Istanbul.¹⁸

By taking matters into their own hands and coupling their financial resources with like-minded agents willing to use force and coercion, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have been relatively successful in shaping regional events. There have been failures – Asad remains in Syria and Qatar will not likely accept Saudi and Emirati leadership – but with the return of a version of the old order in Egypt, the Saudis and Emiratis are driving significant regional developments. With the liberal use of financial resources, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are in the best positions relative to other contenders for power to build regional alignments that are most advantageous to their interests.

Arenas of Conflict

The contenders for leadership in the Middle East compete with each other in a number of arenas, including Bahrain, Libya, Jordan, Gaza and, of course, Iraq, but there are no two arenas as important as Syria and Egypt. The country-specific stakes for all of the players are highest in both countries, and the outcomes of the Syrian civil war and the Egyptian political process will shape the politics of the Middle East more broadly.

THE SYRIAN ABYSS

Within months of the March 2011 protests in Deraa demanding political reform, Syria fell into civil war. Since that time, millions of Syrians have been displaced, and an estimated 160,000 have been killed in a conflict that now involves Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Hezbollah, Russia and Kuwait and, to a lesser extent, the United States, Jordan and Israel. The violence, which has taken on clearly sectarian characteristics, has attracted jihadists from the surrounding region and beyond. The outcome of the Syrian civil war has implications not only for the quality of the country's internal politics, but also for regional leadership contenders – all of whom stand to gain or lose in Syria. The extent of Iranian influence in the Middle East and also the Sunni-Shia balance throughout the region are at stake.

Although the Turks have been forceful in demanding the end of the Asad regime, Ankara has been profoundly reluctant to go beyond the international consensus. Still, Turkey has become deeply involved in the conflict through refugee relief, with 765,369 registered and countless unregistered Syrian refugees in Turkey as of June 2014, as well as its support for groups within Syria's disparate opposition.¹⁹ With the absence of a major Western-led, Arab League-blessed intervention, Ankara has sought to inflict pain on the Asad regime. The approach is based on four factors: 1) Asad is a source of instability that threatens Turkish national security; 2) the Syrian conflict provides an

opportunity to challenge, albeit indirectly, Iranian power; 3) the belief in Ankara that Turkey must be an important actor in post-Asad Syria; and 4) the Syrian conflict is a pressing humanitarian issue. As sound as these judgments may be, the Turks have nevertheless run into trouble developing a coherent Syria policy. The early Turkish decision to turn a blind eye toward and later to facilitate the movement of jihadists to join the fight in Syria has had serious consequences for Turkish national security. Ankara also gravitated toward political and diplomatic support for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which created problems with Turkey's Gulf partners, who nevertheless share Turkish views of Asad and the contest with Iran, though for different reasons.

Overall, Turkey's Syria policy has revealed the limits of Ankara's regional influence. The Turks were unable to compel Asad to pursue a different course and failed to provide any leadership or coherence to the Syrian opposition. In retrospect, these were impossible tasks, but Turkey in the AKP era was supposed to be able to succeed. Instead, Turkey has gotten sucked into another country's civil war and in the process has joined a sectarian fight and encouraged transnational jihadism.

Syria has been equally challenging for Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other regional contenders. For all of the competition and tension between them, the Gulf states share the same goal in Syria: the end of the Asad regime. They have worked to forge a unified and politically coherent opposition without much success. Although they remain committed to Syria's National Coalition and coordination among the Friends of Syria, the Qataris and Saudis – though less so the Emiratis, who have largely focused on humanitarian relief – have concentrated their attention on funding the flow of weaponry to favored groups fighting the Damascus government and its allies, Hezbollah and Iran. Both countries have supported the same groups – which have also received modest

support from Washington – within the insurgency, but there are differences between Doha and Riyadh. Qatar, for example, has increased its support for more extreme elements fighting Asad, whereas Saudi Arabia has been a bit more circumspect. The Saudis recently began to re-evaluate their approach to the insurgency, recognizing the potential risks some of these jihadist groups pose to Saudi Arabia's security. The Saudis and the Qataris deny that there are significant differences between them on Syria, but it is clear that they are vying for influence in a post-Asad era, even as that outcome seems less and less likely. From Riyadh's perspective, Doha's Syria policy is consistent with its support for groups around the region that seek to establish a version of an Islamic state that is a challenge to Saudi Arabia's claims to Islamic authority and authenticity.²⁰

The primary conflict among the various proxies in Syria's civil war involves Saudi Arabia and Iran. Like the Turks, the Saudis see an opportunity in Syria to check Iranian influence in the region, but unlike Ankara, Riyadh tends to see this competition in specifically sectarian terms. If Asad were to prevail, it would be a major strategic advantage for the Iranians, who could claim unrivaled power from Baghdad to Beirut. This is a nightmare scenario for the Saudi leadership, which regards this arc of influence not only as a gain for the Iranian state, but also for the Shia of the region. Unable to distinguish between Tehran's power and Shiism, the Saudis fear Asad's victory will lead to the further destabilization of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's own Eastern Province, which has large numbers of Shia and most of its oil.

While Saudi Arabia views the conflict in Syria in starkly sectarian terms, Iranian leaders tend to see the crisis through the lens of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. As one Iranian official put it: "Today we fight in Syria for interests such as the Islamic Revolution ... Our defense is to the extent of the Sacred Defense."²¹ The reference to

“Sacred Defense” also has a sectarian undertone, but Iran’s policy is more consistent with maintenance and extension of its existing interests and influence in the Arab world. It is through Syria that Iran supports Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and, prior to the Syrian civil war, Hamas. If Asad fell, Tehran’s influence in Syria and the Levant would change dramatically and at Iran’s expense. Recently, Iran and Saudi Arabia have signaled that they are seeking, albeit tentatively, to improve relations.²² Still, Saudi Arabia and Iran will find it difficult to reach common ground on Syria. Both countries are heavily invested in an outcome to the conflict that disadvantages the other. The tenuous diplomatic opening aside, Riyadh continues to call for Asad’s ouster, and Iran has only stepped up its support for the Asad regime since the beginning of this year.

THE CENTRALITY OF EGYPT

Egypt is the historic leader of the Middle East, but since Hosni Mubarak’s downfall, it has become central to the struggle among other regional powers to wield unrivaled influence. It has no financial resources to bring to bear on regional issues, and although Egypt has a large military, the armed forces have a limited capability to project power beyond its borders. The extent to which Egypt retains significant prestige in the Middle East is a testament to the country’s soft power, history, demographic weight and geography. These attributes are so important to regional political and power dynamics that the major Gulf countries have demonstrated that they are willing to invest considerable sums both to ensure their influence in Egyptian politics and, in turn, purchase Egypt’s strategic alignment.

After Hosni Mubarak’s rule came to an end, Ankara sought to capitalize on its soft power, a Turkish economic might and the new affinity between the AKP and the Muslim Brotherhood to draw Egypt into Turkey’s orbit, which was critical to cementing Ankara’s regional ascendance.

Though the Egyptians welcomed Turkish investment, Cairo was never as enthusiastic about this relationship as Ankara. Close alignment with Egypt became moot when relations soured after the July 3, 2013 coup d’état that brought Morsi’s brief tenure to an end.

Soon after the January 25, 2011, uprising, Cairo and Tehran appeared to be taking tentative steps toward changing their previously rather frosty relations. Iranian warships traveled through the Suez Canal and decisionmakers in both countries openly discussed normalizing ties. In August 2012, then-Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi visited Iran for a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement, and his Iranian counterpart made a reciprocal visit to Cairo the following February for the summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

As Egypt’s economic situation deteriorated in the last half of 2012 and the early part of 2013, Tehran made quiet overtures to Cairo about supplying the Egyptians with much-needed fuel.²³ At the time, the Iranians seemed to be considering their options in the event of a major strategic setback in the Levant. Establishing cooperative ties with the Egyptians would have gone a long way toward demonstrating to its opponents in the Gulf, the Israelis and the Americans that whatever trouble Iran might have been having in Syria, Tehran could still be influential in the Middle East. The Iranians made little headway in Egypt, however. Various groups, including Salafis, the military and the United States were deeply opposed to Iran’s opening.

During the Morsi interregnum, it was Qatar that sought to bind itself to Cairo through a commitment of \$5 billion in assistance, along with political and diplomatic support. The July 3, 2013, coup d’état that brought Morsi’s presidency to an end also weakened Qatari influence in Egypt. Since then, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait have become Egypt’s patrons. The three Gulf states have poured \$20

For now, however, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Egypt are comfortable with the terms of their relations and together are driving regional events at the expense of Turkey and Qatar, if not necessarily Iran.

billion in various forms of aid into Egypt – not merely to keep the economy afloat but also to ensure a particular political trajectory in Egypt that does not pose a threat to them or their common strategic interests.²⁴ It is in the Egyptian arena where Saudi, Emirati and Kuwaiti concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood and Iranian power come together. The investment in the Egyptian economy, with more to come, is central to the twin strategy of making the region safe from the Muslim Brothers and Iranian influence. Although Cairo's power has waned in recent decades, the Saudis and Emiratis continue to regard Egypt as critical to their own security. For them, Egypt remains a bellwether from which ideas and trends emerge that necessarily influence the rest of the region, due the country's sheer size and the legacy of past cultural hegemony. If, according to Saudi and Emirati thinking, Egypt were to fall permanently into the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Arab world – which, without Egypt, consists of relatively small countries – would be at the mercy of Iran. This is why both countries, along with Kuwait, have been so staunch in their support of the July 3 coup and the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and other dissenters in Egypt.

There are risks to both Egypt and the Gulf states as a result of the latter's investment in a particular Egyptian political process. If, over time, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait are forced to continue providing large amounts of aid to Cairo, its dependence on these states may become controversial in Egypt and in the Gulf countries' domestic politics. In addition, with the exception of a statement Hosni Mubarak made in 2006 during an interview on Al Arabiya, Egypt has never approached regional problems and conflicts in the explicitly sectarian way that informs, in particular, Saudi foreign and national security policy.²⁵ Financing from and tight strategic coordination with the Gulf may drag the Egyptians into Saudi Arabia's Sunni versus Shia view of the world. Egypt may find it difficult to resist the Saudi approach to Iran, compromising Cairo's desire to pursue an independent foreign policy that will restore what many Egyptians believe to be its natural place leading the region. For now, however, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Egypt are comfortable with the terms of their relations and together are driving regional events at the expense of Turkey and Qatar, if not necessarily Iran.

Future Regional Leader: Same as the Old Regional Leader?

Mubarak's fall in February 2011 threatened the dominant regional political order that had been friendly to the exercise of American power for the previous three decades. The January 25 uprising also produced a significant fissure between Washington and its allies in the region, especially the Gulf states. From the Saudi, Emirati and Kuwaiti – as well as Israeli – perspective, the United States abandoned Hosni Mubarak, who had been a critical ally of Washington in the region. To make matters worse, when the Obama administration acknowledged the outcome of three elections that put the Muslim Brotherhood in power – in an effort to salvage its interests in Egypt and advance democracy in the

region – the Gulf states saw an American effort to advance the Brotherhood’s interests.

In the years since the 2011 protests erupted, the region’s leaders have reacted to what they see as signs of declining U.S. leadership and commitment: potential U.S. energy independence, Washington’s rebalancing toward Asia, its unwillingness to intervene in Syria’s civil war and the Obama administration’s determination to explore a diplomatic opening with Iran. Even though the United States’ broad strategic interests in the region remain what they have been for most of the post-World War II era – ensuring the free flow of energy resources, guaranteeing Israel’s security, preventing any single state from dominating the region, countering terrorism and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – the politics of the region have been scrambled. The regional upheaval has complicated matters considerably for American policymakers as they pursue the same set of interests.

The above geopolitical trends have prompted regional actors to seek solutions to the region’s problems independent of or even in contradiction with U.S. policy. Although it seems that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have positioned themselves best to lead the region, all of the contenders have significant deficits. The Turks have disqualified themselves from the game by misreading their own history, miscalculating their own capacity and failing to understand what made them attractive to the Arab world in the first place. The Qataris are isolated. Egypt is an object of influence, though its long-term goal is to be a driver of events. And the Saudis’ and Emiratis’ policy failures outnumber their successes, despite the massive amount of money they have to spread around the region. As for Iran – and Israel, for that matter – neither is able to influence the region in a positive way, let alone lead it.

Given these realities, it is likely to continue to fall to the United States to lead the region in pursuit

of the common interests it shares with America’s regional partners. At the same time, it is important for policymakers to recognize the limits of Washington’s ability to influence events in the Middle East. Also, Washington and its allies may have a different view of what demonstrating leadership actually means. For the Saudis, Emiratis, Turks and Qataris, the United States could lead through a more direct role in the Syrian crisis, whereas the Obama administration sees Syria as a conflict with no end that would only sap America’s strength, damage its interest and compromise its ability to lead. Despite these disagreements, the contenders for regional power must understand that Washington will remain predominant in the region. Only the United States can secure the shipping lanes of the Persian Gulf, contain or rollback Iran’s nuclear program should negotiations fail, bring Israelis and Arabs to the negotiating table, and effectively coordinate responses to regional issues like counterterrorism and counter-proliferation. The fact that Arab and Turkish officials have lashed out at the United States is the clearest indication that they understand the limits of their own capacity to play leadership roles in the region.

ENDNOTES

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