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INTISSAR FAKIR, editor

THE MIDDLE EAST

UNBALANCED

ANALYSIS FROM A REGION IN TURMOIL

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INTISSAR FAKIR

PREFACE

At their outset, the Arab protests of 2011 shared commonalities across the region—a popular rejection of corrupt and authoritarian regimes that offered no vision for the future. In contrast to preceding decades—when political development appeared slow or even absent—those protests heralded a rapid political change in the region and the possibility of radical alternatives. Today, the outcomes of those protests vary significantly from country to country. For some, this divergence from the commonalities of 2011 has undermined the notion that there was once anything fundamentally common about the protests.

Because such divergence has increased the complexity of mapping the effects of the protests, this collection of essays instead endeavors to explain how a set of countries and issues evolved in light of these protests. Invariably, there are common themes across these countries and issues—authoritarianism, sectarianism, extremism, and social and economic vulnerability—but they are impossible to assess as a singular phenomenon. Each of the countries or issues discussed in this book faces distinct challenges and struggles—and in rare cases, opportunities.

Following the core mission of *Sada*, fostering debate about key issues across the region, this collection of longer essays from young authors explores these distinct circumstances and trajectories. The authors draw on their experiences and extensive research and fieldwork to provide unique insights into a breadth of challenges and issues.

Fadil Aliriza and Mohammed El-Shewy's pieces on Tunisia and Egypt, respectively, illustrate how two countries in North Africa that once shared a brief common moment of hope five years ago have since followed fundamentally different courses. Aliriza argues that the current state of Tunisia offers both hope and caution for its future and that of the region. Having had a comparatively successful post-revolution political transition, the country nonetheless struggles with the legacy of its police state as it attempts to transition into a more pluralistic democratic state. However, Aliriza notes, the international community's eagerness to celebrate Tunisia as the Arab Spring success story may be premature. This, he argues, is because the hard work of reforming state institutions that perpetuated the economic, social, and political conditions that sparked the 2011 uprising will require greater vigilance, unity, and sacrifices. The challenge for the international community is to find a way to support Tunisia's transitional efforts without minimizing the challenges ahead or the standards for accountability.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, El-Shewy argues that since 2011—and perhaps more significantly, since 2013—the state has been undergoing a fundamental transformation from an institution-driven state to an actor-driven state. President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi has turned regional uncertainty, unprecedented internal divisions, and popular fear of political chaos to his advantage, positioning himself as a strongman. El-Shewy explains that Sisi, bolstered by regional instability and supported by the military, is remaking the Egyptian political system by weakening state institutions and stripping away any trappings of formal politics or political opposition. But instead of building what he claims is a strong state, Sisi is presiding over a weak state beset by security, economic, and social challenges. These challenges will be harder to resolve in the absence of state institutions capable of formulating responses that require broader political buy-in.

Moving eastward, the essays address crosscutting themes of sectarianism, food insecurity, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Myriam Benraad explores how sectarianism and Sunni disenchantment in Iraq have fed the appeal of the Islamic State, with implications for the rest of the region. She argues that the Sunni grievances and resentment that surfaced in the immediate aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War and worsened under the policies of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki facilitated the militant group's rise and allowed it a platform. Benraad explains that although the Islamic State became the last resort of Sunni frustration, the militant group could lose its appeal within the community if it continues its extreme and barbaric tactics or if political leaders make a concerted effort to reverse course on the politics of sectarianism.

Addressing Iraq, war-torn Syria, and Yemen, Hadi Fathallah explores the impact conflict has on food security. In the region's war zones, local food production has been devastated by ongoing fighting and is adding to the suffering of already vulnerable communities. The destruction of agricultural infrastructure and the displacement of its labor force is exacerbating immediate food insecurity in war-torn countries and impacting neighboring countries and beyond as refugee flows overburden host countries' food infrastructure. In the long

term, Fathallah warns that the region's food insecurity—compounding entrenched political, economic, and social challenges—could become a contributor to regional instability.

Long the defining regional issue, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has receded in relative importance and influence since 2011. Lihi Ben Shitrit and Mahmoud Jaraba argue that regional actors had abandoned the issue as a priority even before the current wave of crises consumed the region. However, the authors assert that while the issue is becoming increasingly divorced from the regional trends, it is gaining importance as an issue of local and international activism, which could offer an alternative, yet untested, path forward.

The last essay in this collection addresses security in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Suliman Al-Atiqi argues that over the past five years, the GCC countries have had to reconsider their collective security and their role in the region. In Al-Atiqi's view, these countries initially struggled to act together to respond to quickly evolving and highly uncertain geopolitics, including political changes in allied Arab states, growing Iranian influence in the region, the war in Syria, the war in Yemen, and the expansion of the Islamic State. However, what had been an increasingly divided union immediately after the 2011 uprisings, as Saudi Arabia and Qatar clashed over the role of Islamists in post-revolutionary governments, has now become a much stronger organization that is more open to greater military and security cooperation.

As these essays illustrate, the challenges ahead for the region are abundant, but so is popular desire for a better future. What motivated the people of the region in 2011 still drives them today—the courage to reject corruption, authoritarianism, and politics of division—and that provides subtle glimmers of hope for the future. At *Sada*, through articles and projects such as this compilation, our committed writers will continue to track moments of challenge and moments of hope alike and bring a greater understanding of this complex region to our readers.

A young Tunisian celebrates at the World Social Forum in Tunis on March 29, 2013, soon after the second anniversary of the Tunisian uprising. Both the forum and the uprising expressed the desires many young people have for an alternative political, economic, and social system.

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FADIL ALIRIZA

BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND POLICE STATE: TUNISIA'S TROUBLED TRANSITION

TUNISIA, A "SUCCESS"?

Many analysts treat the Middle East and North Africa as a category bound by essential qualities rather than as a unit continuously reconstituted by the very act of studying and describing it as one. This prism refracts political novelty into outliers, exceptions, and models that might herald an alternative order in the region. It is in this framework that Tunisia's *relatively* peaceful political trajectory has been held up as either a model or an exception. But this rush to declare Tunisia an exception—and a democracy—is premature and has obscured the realities of Tunisian political developments.

There are several common prisms through which to observe Tunisian politics since the uprising. The first is the regional comparative one. In this reading, Tunisia appears as a "success" compared to its neighbors, where violence and structural collapse have battered the hopes of the initial uprisings. A second prism traces the debate over the public role of religion. In this reading, Tunisia appears as a "success" for navigating beyond divisions between Islamists and secularists by opting for a politics of consensus. However, both of these approaches and their optimistic conclusions have distracted from the tensions that fueled the uprising and continue to shape Tunisian politics. Instead, a more helpful prism is that of two competing political systems: democracy and police state. Amid this struggle, Tunisia's international plaudits have contributed to the impression that democracy is winning when the opposite may be true.

THE POLICE STATE IN THEORY

In many ways, Tunisia's uprising was against its police state, or as one scholar argues with slightly different emphasis, it was "against its national security state."[1] Both the blunt end of this system—the security forces and intelligence gathering apparatus—as well as its structural bureaucratic implements were coordinated by the Ministry of Interior, Tunisia's most important and obscure state structure. Its carrot-and-stick approach of punishment and cooptation characterized Tunisian public life. The carrot was a patronage system within an economy dependent on public employment. The stick was police violence, which included brutal torture of the regime's opponents. This system operated on fear and shaped the resistance that would spark the 2010–2011 uprising.

The uprising and its aftershocks were democratic in the sense that masses of ordinary citizens took sustained, collective, political action in a way that vetoed the previous regime and continued to radically shape government policy for some time afterward. Many of the identifiable "successes" of the Tunisian transition process resulted from this reinvigorated strain of democratic politics. This included a progressive new constitution, several free and fair elections, and greater independence for sectors of society previously dependent on or constrained by the state: political parties, journalists, lawyers, judges, and civil society.

> Tunisia's old regime figures have mostly followed a path of resistance, attempting to reconstitute a political current antithetical to democratic reforms.

After any radical political upheaval, the remnants of the old order will never be completely obliterated but will adapt to, coopt, and resist the new politics to varying degrees. Tunisia's old regime figures have mostly followed a path of resistance, attempting to reconstitute a political current antithetical to democratic reforms. This counterrevolutionary project has been spearheaded not only by the old-regime politicians steering the Nidaa Tounes party, but also by some members of the business elite, media, security forces, and bureaucracy.

While not advocating specifically for a police state model, adherents to this political current express a sort of nostalgia for a disciplinary, authoritarian, and interventionist state built on police violence. This philosophy of government tends to extol stability and security, justified through a "culture of danger, ceaselessly reactivated;"[2] this approach has garnered increasing popularity as spectacular terrorist attacks have highlighted the issue of security. Lazhar Akremi, one of the cofounders of the currently governing Nidaa Tounes party, expressed the logic of a severe security apparatus: "Look at Libya, Yemen, Syria,

Iraq, and even Egypt. [Comparatively] we have a very minimum of destabilization, and that's thanks to the security forces."[3]

This thinking, like democracy plaudits, highlights Tunisia's exceptionalism, but from a different perspective. Here the security state, not democracy, ensures stability and therefore success. It is also captured in President Beji Caid Essebsi's oft-invoked call to preserve *haibat al-dawla*, or the "prestige of the state." In the face of perceived security threats, such as terrorism, this philosophy has been reactivated to sustain or revive elements of the police state.

THE POLICE STATE IN PRACTICE

This has manifested in the renewed habits of a single-party system. The numerous political crises of 2013, including the fierce debate over the role of religion, economic troubles, a security vacuum, and tensions between state institutions and the government, were allayed through a politics of consensus that is not synonymous with the politics of democracy. In early 2015, this "strategy of conflict avoidance"[4] led the two opposing major political parties, Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, to join with each other in a broad, Nidaa-led governing coalition that included 82.5 percent of all elected legislators, leaving only 17.5 percent to the opposition. This percentage of legislators is higher than what the former Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party used to win in former president Ben Ali's rubber-stamp parliaments. Moreover, the presidency and the parliament are dominated by the same party (Nidaa Tounes), so the executive body has been able to exert considerable influence over the legislative body, a situation at odds with even the ambiguous separation of powers outlined in the new constitution. These two branches of government operate with unclear institutional separation or independence in the post-uprising period, and there is no constitutional court nor an independent judiciary able to adjudicate disputes over authority.[5]

Since the transition of power back to old-regime figures who dominate the leadership of Nidaa Tounes, there has been a notable lack of parliamentary debate over the most important legislative moves. These include primarily the antiterrorism law, the recapitalization of state-owned banks burdened with bad debt by the old regime cronies, and the "reconciliation" law that offers amnesty to the corrupt. Some new laws have provoked condemnation by human rights groups,[6] while some old repressive laws remain on the books despite the progressive new constitution.

Other elements of the former system persist. Police violence has largely continued. The Ministry of Interior has resisted civilian oversight,[7] and long-promised municipal elections that would strip the ministry of the authority to appoint local chiefs still have no fixed date as of this publication. Patronage, corruption, and old state-linked networks of power continue to dominate the economy as before.

Finally, the police state model is making a comeback in the state's repression of dissent. Several opposition parties and politicians have been tarred with allegations of "salafi jihadism" or "terrorism."[8] Over a dozen legislators from the ruling Nidaa Tounes party sued the head of the Truth and Dignity Commission, a state institution charged with investigating and documenting the abuses of the past regimes, for alleged breaches of the new antiterrorism law.[9] Members of the government have linked labor strikes to terrorism,[10] and a state of emergency was used to break up strikes and protests in late summer 2015. The language of security has always been used to justify this philosophy of government; with the increasing frequency of spectacular terrorist attacks after the uprising, this language carries more power. Now, however, the language of democracy and Tunisia's exceptional success at peaceful transition is also being used to justify this conceptualization of the state.

DEMOCRACY AGAINST DEMOCRATS

Proponents of a police state system have used the successes of democracy activists against them. International praise for Tunisia's success reached a crescendo in 2014 with the passing of the constitution and holding of presidential and parliamentary elections. This neatly coincided with the ascendance of political actors who represent the past system and the return of old police-state habits. This paradox appeared "as if the 2014 elections sealed people's agency, as if the democratic process was conveniently frozen at the point when it best suited old hands."[11] The formal, institutional, and electoral measures of democracy functioned as a new garb of legitimacy for a familiar political elite, a return to the "stability" of the old regime.

Calls for progressive reform or human rights protections have been attacked as threats to Tunisia's new status as a democracy. As Lazhar Akremi, one cofounder of Nidaa Tounes, frames it, "The question of torture, it's an excuse to talk about the incapacity of the government … [and] to say that the elections of last October 26 [2014] were not the end of this process of democratic transition. No more, no less."[12] Meanwhile, the secretary-general of Nidaa Tounes, Mohsen Marzouk, suggested that popular demonstrations against the "reconciliation" law were irresponsible because the revolution and democratic elections resulted in a parliament with the exclusive right to debate legislation.[13] This understanding of democracy, narrow as it is, is being invoked by some against a more pluralistic and inclusive political society.

At the same time, international institutions have chosen to praise Tunisia for its peaceful, but not necessarily democratic, transition. Sometimes the two are conflated, and this also reinforces the particularities of a strong statist system. Democratization is often not peaceful, particularly when it means asserting rights in opposition to an entrenched, well-armed, and authoritarian state. In October 2015, the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to the four Tunisian organizations that managed the dia-

logue surrounding the political crisis of 2013. The committee announced that the award was for the organizations' "contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy" and that "these organizations represent different sectors and values in Tunisian society,"[14] but this narrative is misleading.

The four recipients of the Nobel Prize are the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT); the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts (UTICA, the equivalent of a chamber of commerce); the Tunisian Human Rights League; and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers. This unelected "quartet" stepped into the political process in late 2013 ostensibly to mediate between the transitional government led by the Islamist Ennahda party and its secular opponents through a National Dialogue. The opposition was calling for the government's resignation, and some called for the dissolution of the elected interim legislature and the constitution-drafting body, then Tunisia's only truly democratic organ.

However, the quartet was not a neutral mediator representative of the Tunisians who bravely confronted the regime in the uprising.[15] The UGTT and UTICA are organizations that have long operated almost like state institutions, keeping a stranglehold on labor and capital, respectively—in a way that stifles small entrepreneurship like that of Mohamed Bouazizi, the vegetable seller whose self-immolation sparked the Arab Spring. Moreover, the National Dialogue process was opaque and unaccountable. As one scholar remarked, the quartet taught the lesson that in times of difficult political contention, the solution lies in abandoning democratic structures.[16]

Apart from the symbolic measures designed to support Tunisia's democracy that in reality are being twisted to support the pre-revolution status quo, Tunisia's international allies are also providing financial and military assistance in the name of supporting democracy. Again, there is the potential for these to undermine it instead. Tunisia's security sector appears to be at least partly outside of civilian control, while continuing to practice repression.[17] Since the uprising, there have been countless examples of police officers beating journalists and peaceful demonstrators, torturing prisoners, making sweeping arrests based on dress and social status, and arbitrarily enforcing secret laws (*circulaires*), particularly regarding issues of morality. Yet in the name of supporting democracy, this security sector is receiving international funding for equipment, training, and technical assistance—without any conditions for reform.

> International institutions have chosen to praise Tunisia for its peaceful, but not necessarily democratic, transition.

Much of the financial assistance has gone directly into loan assistance guarantees rather than development aid, thereby perpetuating or even exacerbating the Tunisian state's exist-

ing fiscal habits, which fuel crony capitalism. Moreover, two separate government audits have found that the Tunisian-American Enterprise Fund, a U.S. program to promote economic development, lacks transparency and institutional checks to prevent "illicit use of the fund."[18] This sort of assistance in the name of democracy risks "merely proposing a new way of linking business elites across national boundaries" while excluding the Tunisian people from economic decisions.[19]

DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE?

Despite all these challenges to democratic governance and a return to a police state model, there are indications that competition among political visions will continue. While there has been some consolidation between the governing class and media moguls, journalists are attempting to assert their independence through their union and by lobbying parliament for legal protections. Some judges are asserting independence from security forces by ruling on terrorism cases based on evidence rather than instructions from the police.[20] Civil society activists are influencing the legislative process and political debate.[21] Political parties are showing signs of resisting the single-party model.[22] The fact that secularists and Islamists are governing together may diminish the potential for political crises sparked by mutual fear between the two camps.

What will the future hold for these two competing political visions? There are a few bellwethers that will shape this debate. One will be how Tunisia incorporates its unemployed—especially unemployed youth—into the economy. Will this incorporation be achieved democratically or through traditional methods of cooptation and violence? Turnout in Tunisia's three post-uprising elections have steadily decreased, with youth turnout particularly low in the last elections. This suggests that their grievances will not be translated into democratic activism within the framework of party politics. Rather, many of these youth appear to be resisting the state, either through labor strikes or emigration—mostly to Europe, but a small percentage become jihadis in Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

Another key issue will be how civilian politicians approach state institutions and bureaucracies. Will there be democratic reform or political cooptation? In the case of education and health, the current government appears to be approaching these public sectors with an aim to reform them. However, in the far more powerful security and judicial sectors, different factions of the political and business elite are competing for influence. Without transparency, this competition obstructs democratic reform that might redefine these state institutions to favor "public" security or rule of law.

Finally, the prospect of decentralization will be another key indicator of the trajectory of Tunisia's political system between the two tendencies. The head of Tunisia's independent electoral commission has announced that municipal elections will be held sometime in

2016. These elections present the possibility that local mobilization and political participation could eliminate the Ministry of Interior's power to appoint local politicians. However, it may also mean that private sector monopolies, smuggler-linked mafias, and business moguls will be better able to pursue their political interests at a local level without having to negotiate with a central government.

While it is impossible for there to be a synthesis of a democracy and a police state, it appears that elements of the latter have succeeded in weathering a reinvigorated and active public. This has of course been achieved through the usual tactics of highlighting security concerns. However, instruments of a police state have also cynically used the "democracy" label to stymie debate. It remains unclear whether frustration among Tunisia's governed will continue to find expression through nascent, post-uprising, institutional frameworks or whether this frustration will increase to the point that it can only find expression through either resistance or obedience. Nevertheless, understanding these dynamics can serve to better align the expressed intentions and effects of Tunisia's international partners.

Egyptians protesting military rule clash with security services on Mohamed Mahmoud Street near Cairo's Tahrir Square on the evening of November 18, 2011, when around 50 were killed and more than 3000 injured. The street is an iconic space where murals depict portraits of those killed since the January 25 uprising, though the cost of such political expression has only risen as the state expands.

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MOHAMED EL-SHEWY

SISI MARCHES ON: THE EXPANSION OF THE EGYPTIAN STATE

A STRONG STATE

Since his election as president in June 2014, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has reinvigorated the state as the primary element in Egyptian political life—reminiscent of the nationalist approach that prevailed under Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s. Sisi has gone about rebuilding a strong Egyptian state by expanding the executive branch at the expense of other branches; empowering the military, which, in turn, is heavily investing in the presidency; and stifling all opposition: civilian, religious, and political. This crackdown on opposition—through repression and the systematic weakening and undermining of state institutions capable of keeping checks on the presidency, such as parliament and the judiciary—is gradually stripping the country of any political character, which Sisi equates with chaos and disorder.

This depoliticization creates an actor-driven state—rather than an institution-driven one—composed primarily of military figures inexperienced in matters of governance. This has resulted in the lack of a long-term, viable vision to address economic and security challenges facing the country.

DEPOLITICIZING EGYPT

In the lead-up to his election, Sisi explained that his strategic goal was to preserve the Egyptian state, which meant a strong presidency backed by a powerful military.[1] Sisi further

expounded on this vision in a December 2014 speech, stating that regimes vulnerable to change were "unacceptable" and that the job of an elected president is to stabilize the country, clearly outlining his executive authority over other institutions.[2] Sisi later described the country's constitution, ratified only two years before, as flawed and criticized parliament's power to interfere with presidential decisionmaking and authority.[3] Since becoming president, Sisi has been strengthening these elements of the state—the presidency and military—to become the primary political actors.

Sisi's priorities will continue to be consolidating the state's dominance and ensuring political opposition is tightly controlled or eliminated outright. The June 30 coup that paved his way to power was not only against the Muslim Brotherhood but also against organized political opposition. For Sisi and the military apparatus from which he came, the Brotherhood and other political actors (such as the April 6 Movement) had nearly jeopardized the security and stability of the Egyptian state, necessitating the harsh crackdown underway since 2013. The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party—one of the few parties with a strong electoral base—was swiftly dissolved and declared a terrorist organization. Non-Islamist political movements and civil society groups have also either been banned outright—as was the case with the April 6 Movement—or have had most of their members jailed. This campaign to strip the country of political actors gained strength amid popular apathy toward political action, echoing Sisi's views on politics.

> Sisi's priorities will continue to be consolidating the state's dominance and ensuring political opposition is tightly controlled or eliminated outright.

The judiciary has had a significant and complicated role in this process. At times, the judiciary has supported Sisi, enthusiastically handing down harsh court sentences to the regime's opponents. However, at other times, the judiciary has resisted executive pressures and sought to maintain some of its strength and independence and ensure that its structure is shielded from overt presidential meddling. One example was the judiciary's efforts to resist pressure to accelerate the pace of its verdicts, prompting criticism from Sisi that judges were taking too long to carry out death sentences against political opponents the regime refers to as terrorists.[4] Another example is the judiciary's successful effort to reverse a decision originally decreed by interim president Adly Mansour to expedite judicial rulings on the country's election laws. The Supreme Constitutional Court can again take its time to rule on the constitutionality of the electoral law, even since a parliament was elected, allowing the court to dissolve sitting parliaments at any moment and maintain some power over the legislative branch.

THE STATE AND THE MILITARY

The military takeover in 2013 took place in a context of deep polarization and fear of chaos in which a strong and unified state not swayed by ideology was seen as necessary to maintain order. To this end, Sisi has resorted to a distinct brand of populist nationalism in his drive to weaken political actors. The military has been at the center of this revitalized nationalism, portraying itself as an apolitical body and the only one capable of uniting the disparate institutions of the Egyptian state. The armed forces have been the main arbiter and powerbroker in Egyptian politics since independence, although during the later years of Hosni Mubarak's rule, their influence was curbed in favor of business elites and the National Democratic Party (NDP). But since 2011, the military has regained and even solidified its hold over politics, taking on an even greater role after Sisi's takeover in 2013.

Under Sisi's presidency, the military is increasingly becoming the state's primary actor instead of exerting influence from the background, as it had done during the Mubarak years. The military involvement in the country's economy has also increased. In previous years, the military had acted as rent-seekers—using its elevated position within the state to gain access to patronage and profit-making schemes—but the nature of its economic initiatives under Sisi indicate that it is moving beyond mere rent-seeking and increasingly becoming a core financial backer of the regime. The military has taken on many large-scale "national projects," such as the New Suez Canal, that do not necessarily guarantee immediate profits.[5] Well aware of the nascent regime's shaky status, the military entered into these national projects with the primary objective of strengthening Sisi's standing, but also to strengthen the military's presence in governance. With the crackdown on civilian political life, the military has positioned itself as the sole guarantor of the regime's survival. The stakes are now higher for the military than under Mubarak, as the military is no longer simply a partner to the state but is directly invested in the regime and in Sisi himself.

Other security organs, such as the Ministry of Interior and the military's intelligence agency, have supported the military in this effort, motivated by their own desire for stability. The near collapse of the state in 2011 has given rise to a sense of collective threat and cohesion around Sisi, particularly for the Ministry of Interior and the police establishment, which suffered humiliation in the aftermath of the 2011 protests. With the military's approval, the police have been able to return to their repressive security methods to re-impose supremacy over citizens with impunity. These agencies view Sisi as the strongest guarantor of the pre-uprising status quo.

WEAKENING PARLIAMENT

The president's reliance on the military as a political backer is in turn derived from his view that the military can substitute for political parties. In May 2015, Sisi told politi-

cal party representatives that they should run as one electoral bloc so that parliament can "rise above narrow-minded partisan and personal interests and achieve supreme national interests."[6] Lacking a party he could use as a political vehicle like Mubarak's NDP, and uninterested in forming one, Sisi didn't see much use for parliament or the parties that would constitute it. Active political parties—even those supportive of Sisi—are mostly weak, disorganized, and unable to disseminate their messages beyond restricted cadres, which validates Sisi's view of them.

Instead, the military establishment has moved to ensure the security branch's continued control over the legislature by creating a new group of former military figures and pro-military business elites to replace political actors.[7] This has been crucial in aiding Sisi's attempts to circumvent politics. Chief among these military figures is Sameh Seif El-Yazal, a former intelligence officer and strategic adviser who formed the "For the Love of Egypt" electoral list. Electoral lists, which bring together various parties so that they can run as one bloc, are normally coordinated by one of the member parties. But the inclusion of El-Yazal, who does not belong to any party, as the head of "For the Love of Egypt" eschews traditional party politics altogether and ensures that the military's direct presence in parliament will keep it weak. In this way, the regime is manipulating the already existing political structures to actively weaken their influence at the expense of the executive and military. The military-backed electoral lists can be seen as an attempt by the Sisi regime to form a political base for itself in the future, though they remain an ad hoc and short-term measure. It is more likely that Sisi is wary of tarnishing the image that he is driven purely by national interest rather than ideological bias. However, this stance actively diminishes the potential for the regime to develop a political base that can be strengthened and embedded in society.

> Active political parties—even those supportive of Sisi—are mostly weak, disorganized, and unable to disseminate their messages beyond restricted cadres, which validates Sisi's view of them.

The president has also exploited his temporary legislative powers to weaken parliament on an institutional level. In July 2015, Sisi enacted an electoral law heavily favoring individual candidates, allocating them 75 percent of total seats as opposed to the 20 percent in place for party lists. (The remaining 5 percent of seats are appointed directly by the president.) This setup is advantageous to businessmen and well-connected families, who can use their networks and funds to win seats, and further weakens political parties and movements. Using legal measures, Sisi has been able to remove any oversight powers from parliament. As of December 2015, Sisi has ratified over 220 legislative acts without parliamentary oversight, the majority of which are related to the military and security sectors,

granting them more powers at parliament's expense.[8] Furthermore, as part of his legislative authority, Sisi gave military and security bodies, such as the Ministry of Interior, a direct role in preparing and drafting laws by establishing a Legislative Reform Committee in June 2014 and appointing members of the Interior and Defense Ministries to it. The committee will continue to operate even with the newly elected parliament, further undermining the institution, as it potentially allows for an alternative legislative body more closely aligned with the executive.

THE REALITY OF THE STRONG STATE

While Sisi has based his legitimacy on the promise of a strong and stable state, he has not delivered on this promise. Indeed, state institutions like parliament are weak, and the political actors are even weaker; thus the military-backed presidency drives the state. But the state is dysfunctional and vulnerable; it is unable to deal with the numerous challenges it is facing. In the absence of political solutions to issues of governance, the state relies instead on short-term and military-led approaches that fall short. However, the population will continue to expect Sisi to deliver on promises to improve their daily lives—promises the regime needs to keep to maintain its legitimacy. But the statist approach has resulted in policies that are devoid of new ideas and have largely "reproduced the same patterns of social and economic marginalization that existed before the 2011 revolution."[9]

An Islamic State flag stands over the town of Rashad on September 11, 2014. Rashad, on the road between Kirkuk and Tikrit, has been at the frontline of fighting between the Kurdish Peshmerga and Islamist militants. Current hostilities in Iraq have roots going back at least a decade, a period that has seen the disempowerment of the Sunni population in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion.

MYRIAM BENRAAD

RESIGNED TO THE CALIPHATE: IRAQ, SUNNI DISENCHANTMENT, AND THE ISLAMIC STATE

THE APPEAL OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

The resilience of the Islamic State (IS) despite a sustained campaign of airstrikes over Iraq and Syria for more than a year remains of great concern to the international community. By the admission of Western strategists, the battle will be both long and comprehensive. In recent months, despite numerous military setbacks and human losses on the ground, the jihadi organization has recruited more than 30,000 combatants, which illustrates the ideological pull of its "caliphate" and its ability to mobilize broadly and regenerate itself. The Islamic State's political project appears to maintain unfailing attractiveness, not only across the Middle East but also globally.

Understanding this complex phenomenon requires considering its roots, linked primarily to Iraq and the situation of its Sunni population since 2003. For more than a decade, they have been on the sidelines of the political process, suffering a crisis of representation that has prevented them from foreseeing any future for their people. Struck by measures seen as unequal and embittered by foreign occupation and the rise to power of both Shia and Kurds, Sunnis ended up betting on the Islamic State as a vehicle—or the least bad option—to fulfill their collective revenge and build a new political system. In many respects, they are the cornerstone of the present struggle, especially as many increasingly tend to reject IS and its barbarism, much of which they did not necessarily foresee.

DEEP SUNNI RESENTMENT

The Islamic State cannot be reduced to a multinational group that emerged ex nihilo; indeed, it is the monstrous outcome of Iraq's situation and its decay. Iraq's Sunni question has remained unresolved for more than a decade and resulted in pushing the community into the arms of the most violent player—which in this case promised Sunnis the inversion of their pariah status and the realization of their desires.

Since the fall of the Baathist regime, many Sunnis in Iraq have rejected the new system and consequently resorted to armed insurgency—perhaps with the exception of the 2010 legislative elections, when they tried and failed to reintegrate themselves into the political scene. While this marginalization was not the sole cause of radicalization, many mistakes and misunderstandings contributed to alienating Sunnis almost permanently. De-Baathification, first decreed to purge the Iraqi state of remnants of the former regime, resulted in what many Sunnis considered fierce "de-Sunnification." Prior to the U.S. invasion in 2003, Sunnis were also exaggeratedly portrayed by the United States and former opponents as the backbone of the Baath Party, which had monopolized power and repressed society. Transitional governments established under U.S. sponsorship inadvertently promoted a sectarian reordering of Iraq that reduced Sunnis to a minority status, a fate they have since constantly tried to escape.

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In the aftermath of the U.S. invasion, a Sunni armed insurgency rapidly emerged, opposing both the foreign presence and a political process in which any participation was "collaboration." The withdrawal of Sunnis grew stronger as U.S. forces led violent operations in their provinces designed to hunt down clandestine Baathists—most notably in 2003 and 2004 when counterinsurgency efforts specifically targeted Anbar province, for example. Marked by its diversity, the insurgency brought together members of the former regime (favorable or not toward the return of Saddam Hussein to power), Islamists and nationalists outraged by the occupiers' misdeeds (including violence against civilians and arbitrary detentions), members of the disbanded army, and a still nascent Salafi-jihadi current. A number of Sunni cities initially adopted a wait-and-see attitude to judge the U.S. intention to truly "free" the country and therefore did not immediately join the armed struggle. However, the killing of demonstrators in Fallujah by U.S. fire in April 2003 brought things to a head.

One year later, in March 2004, four Blackwater private contractors were ambushed in the same city, killed, burned, and hung on a bridge spanning the Euphrates River. In retalia-

tion, the United States launched Operation Vigilant Resolve against insurgents from April to May of that year and then a second from November to December, Operation Phantom Fury, which turned Fallujah into a heap of rubble. That same year, the revelation that the U.S. military was torturing inmates in the Abu Ghraib prison further radicalized Sunnis, who massively boycotted the elections in January 2005. Insurgency continued, marked by the growing strength of al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch, led at the time by Jordanian jihadi Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He sectarianized the struggle by redirecting it against Shia in addition to the ongoing fight against Americans.

The drafting of the Iraqi Constitution in summer 2005 and a second round of elections in December 2005 confirmed the pattern of Sunni marginalization, while the national reconciliation promised by then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, a member of the Shia Dawa Party, did not materialize. Often seen as mere "collaborators" of the occupation, Sunnis whom the government co-opted (mostly Muslim Brothers linked to the Iraqi Islamic Party) were devoid of any genuine representation and were frowned upon by populations in the provinces where violence raged on a daily basis. In 2010, the last Sunni hopes of a meaningful return to the political scene were shattered when—in spite of the victory by their political champion, Iyad Allawi, in the legislative elections—Maliki managed to maintain power and systemize repression against them.

FROM PULLOUT TO COLLAPSE

In this environment, the Islamic State emerged in fall 2006. Since the bloody events of Fallujah and the withdrawal of Sunnis from Iraqi politics, the Salafi-jihadi movement had continued to garner support. Its increasing popularity was due not only to insurgents' attraction to al-Qaeda, but also to its military and tactical power and the determination of its members. While sectarianizing the fight, Zarqawi also "Iraqified" the group's Iraqi branch by placing an Iraqi vanguard at the top, which he thought would allow it to carry a distinct political project for Sunnis. One of these leaders, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, established the Islamic State a few months after Zarqawi's death. Abu Omar was then killed in 2010, and Abu Bakr replaced him and remains the current "caliph." Temporarily weakened because Sunni tribes of the Sahwa (Awakening) movement mobilized against its members between 2007 and 2008, the Islamic State quickly reconstituted itself against the backdrop of civil war in Syria and expanded into the country.

Meanwhile, the last U.S. troops pulled out of Iraq in December 2011, leaving Maliki firmly in command. Not content with having consolidated all power while routinely shunning Sunnis, the Shia prime minister revived de-Baathification to eliminate his rivals and subverted most institutions by subjugating them to his authoritarian inclinations. The day after the final U.S. withdrawal, Maliki issued an arrest warrant against the Sunni vice-president, Tariq al-Hashimi, who was later sentenced to death in absentia. In December 2012, the

witch hunt of Sunni political figures took a new turn with the arrest of several bodyguards of Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, a native of Fallujah. A protest movement took shape in Anbar province in which a camp of demonstrators on the outskirts of Ramadi echoed the Arab uprisings. This mobilization, initially peaceful, spread to all Sunni areas.

Among the protesters' demands were the total abrogation of de-Baathification—the cause of so much of their misfortune—and the repeal of the anti-terror laws and death penalty that had become tools of blind repression. Though the movement, overseen by various political trends, was not yet radicalized and still open to dialogue, the protesters' discourse was already filled with references to lost political power and the idea that Sunni identity was in danger because of the ascent of Iraqi Shia and Iran. Maliki reacted with hostility and threatened violence against the protesters. Although Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani managed to dissuade him for a short while, reforms were slow to materialize.

Prospects for a settlement disappeared in late 2012, when Maliki, feeling threatened, turned to harsher methods to suppress the protests. The ultimate turning point occurred in April 2013, when gunmen linked to the Baath Party murdered a soldier near a protest camp in Hawija, in Kirkuk province. Concerned about a possible return of his old Baathist enemies, Maliki sent the army and special forces to encircle the camp, killing 44 unarmed demonstrators. In Mosul, the Iraqi army had become an occupying force in the eyes of the population, reportedly extorting money at checkpoints and organizing systematic shortages of food and basic services. Furious Sunnis called for justice. These developments bolstered cross-border Sunni solidarity and increased the appeal of IS within and beyond Iraq.

While the demonstrations were initially led by average citizens (as with the other Arab uprisings), in Iraq their tone and actions became more radical under the influence of the jihadis who had infiltrated them. On April 9, 2013, the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, the Islamic State of Iraq renamed itself the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

MILITARIZING THE REVOLT

The Sunni protests thus turned from a peaceful mobilization into a renewed insurgency. Such militarization was manifest through the rise of militias, some of which recruited elements of the former regime. In fact, the demonstrations were hijacked early on by political parties and armed groups. For example, Ramadi was dominated by two forces, namely the coalition of former president of Parliament Usama al-Nujaifi, which was close to tribes and imams, and the Iraqi Islamic Party, an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the north, the protests were controlled by insurgents, such as members of the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order, formed in 2006 by Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri after Saddam Hussein's death. Meanwhile, by 2013 the Islamic State had taken over Fallujah and other cities.

At the same time, Baghdad increased its maneuvers against Sunni leaders. In June 2013, elections in Anbar led to the nomination of a new governor, Ahmed Khalaf al-Dhiyabi, known for his active role in the protests. Negotiations with Maliki culminated in a meeting between the two in the Iraqi capital in October 2013. However, the governor's rapprochement with Baghdad was not to everyone's liking, and fighters and sympathizers of the insurgency saw it as a betrayal. In late November, Dhiyabi and Maliki held another meeting to examine Sunni aspirations. The discussion was in vain, and Maliki continued to strengthen his military presence in Sunni areas. As a consequence, calls spread further for armed resistance and government overthrow.

From then on, the insurgent wing gained the upper hand, clashing with the army in several areas bordering Syria, where the Islamic State had been establishing bases. A number of Sunni tribes still supported the central state against the "terrorists" who were extorting and murdering populations. However, the arrest of Sunni Member of Parliament Ahmad al-Alwani and the brutal dismantling of the Ramadi protest camp on Maliki's orders in December 2013, on the grounds that it sheltered al-Qaeda members, gave jihadis the upper hand. Official Iraqi television networks broadcast the "confessions" of alleged IS fighters, while all communications in Anbar were cut and civilian movements restricted. The Islamic State's offensive was imminent, and Maliki's decision on December 31 to recall the army, after having used it as a tool for repression, allowed the jihadis to take over.

SCENARIO OF PARTITION?

The IS insurgency that increased in 2013 turned out to be much more radical than what Iraq had witnessed before. In the course of deteriorating relations between Baghdad and Sunni provinces, the Islamic State garnered support from imams and tribes who had once opposed al-Qaeda. Denouncing Maliki's repeated "aggression," tribal leaders and imams called on Sunni soldiers to desert the Iraqi army. The primary beneficiary of these calls was the Islamic State. Capitalizing on common Sunni resentment in Iraq and Syria, and equipped with pickup trucks carrying men who were heavily armed, they began to seize Fallujah in early 2014. A few months later, Mosul fell to their hands as well. After the army and the governor defected, the Islamic State announced the end of colonial borders and the establishment of its caliphate.

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When the Islamic State launched its campaign of conquest, it operated in familiar terrain, and its combatants were often welcomed as liberators. A number of Sunni factions,

jihadi or not, came to its side, hoping to win a tactical victory against the governments of Baghdad and Damascus, their domestic Shia allies, and Iran. The Islamic State was seen as the best means to "re-Sunnify" both Iraq and Syria and flip the existing power structures. This went beyond the nationalist discourse that Sunnis had long championed. For their part, the jihadis skillfully exploited frustration with the government to ensure support (or at least passivity) among local populations.

Once installed, the Islamic State strove to win hearts and minds through methods similar to ones used by political groups: IS promised to restore security and justice, provide infrastructure and services (electricity, water, and sewage), create jobs, and fight corruption. Given the deep roots of Sunni resentment, the quest for security and justice has become most pronounced among Sunnis. In 2013, on the eve of the crisis, many were no longer confident in the judicial system, and the majority of Mosul's inhabitants felt unsafe. Overall, Sunnis still fear the return of the Iraqi army to their regions, as well as Shia militias backed by Baghdad and Tehran—including the Popular Mobilization Forces, also known as the Hashd, that have between 60,000 and 120,000 men in the field. Despite these forces' military successes on the ground, most notably in provinces like Salahuddin and Anbar, local Sunni populations still view these military forces with suspicion, if not fear, thus obstructing the anti-IS campaign.

AN END IN SIGHT?

Despite its appeal, support for the Islamic State within Iraq varies from one region to another. Many Sunnis, including insurgents, do not subscribe to the totalitarian vision of Sunni Islam promoted by the Islamic State; they have borne the brunt of the organization's extreme violence. In many instances, civilians' submission to the caliphate is incidental, namely to escape death. Similarly, the IS governance strategy has run into obstacles. In addition to its obscene barbarism, the jihadis have not kept their socioeconomic commitments. Sunni populations today are thus divided over the Islamic State, its legitimacy, and what a possible "day after" could look like. This brings into question the group's long-term appeal and sustainability and could create further opportunities in the fight against them.

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Conversely, some continue to support the Islamic State, either out of ideological conviction or because there is no credible alternative. Sunni politicians in Baghdad and the

provinces have lost much of their credibility with the Sunni population since the early days of the offensive. Even a belated inclusion of these politicians in the existing process is unlikely to result in any form of progress. Moreover, few Sunnis envisage a return to Baghdad. Sunni tribes that reject the Islamic State and demand arms from the government believe that the military and security apparatus that collapsed in both Mosul and Ramadi is incapable of protecting them. In addition, the abuses of the military and the Popular Mobilization Forces render their redeployment in Sunni provinces undesirable. In exchange for help battling the Islamic State, some of these tribes demand regional autonomy similar to the Kurdish model, which Baghdad has always opposed.

In an ideal but improbable situation, defeating the Islamic State would involve a complete reversal of the conditions that enabled its emergence in the first place: the 2003 dissolution of the Iraqi army that was tainted by many scandals; de-Baathification and broad anti-terror laws that targeted Sunnis; and thousands of arrests that fostered Salafi radicalization among detainees on U.S. bases and in Iraqi prisons. However, at this stage of turmoil, a national overhaul is unlikely. Indeed, without rebalancing the equation on the ground, no genuine change can occur and Sunnis will not move on from the Islamic State if its demise means a return to the status quo.

Syrians who fled bombing in Aleppo try to get food at a tent city near Azaz, close to the Bab al-Salam border crossing with Turkey, on February 10, 2016. As violent conflict has proliferated across the region, one often neglected multiplier effect has been a series of crises in the production, storage, transportation, and distribution of food.

HADI FATHALLAH

ANOTHER CASUALTY OF WAR: CONFLICT AND FOOD INSECURITY IN SYRIA, IRAQ, AND YEMEN

FOOD AND CONFLICT

Protracted conflicts across the region are undermining the availability of and access to food. In Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, food production has been severely disrupted.[1] Key agricultural infrastructures have been destroyed; lines of transportation for food exchange and trade have been cut off; and livestock, harvests, and food reserves have been plundered. The loss of labor capital to displacement, migration, death, and disability during conflict is also jeopardizing future prospects for sustainable local food production. As large numbers of people are displaced, pockets of food insecurity are forming as sudden increases in food demand add pressure to host communities experiencing sharp population increases. The exacerbation of food insecurity adds to the intractability of these conflicts and the vulnerability of local communities.

Even before the current crises, climate change and its impact on water and soil resources, as well as demographic trends like urbanization and the growth of the middle class, had already been challenging regional food security and causing the decline of agricultural output among local communities.[2] Local production was unable to meet the needs of the growing regional population, currently estimated at 381 million people. After the first rise in global food prices in 2007 and 2008, Arab countries—which were already importing almost 70 percent of their food—as well international organizations, such as the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), began to realize the extent to which they were at risk of food shortages.[3] The unrest and conflict that have arisen—or intensified—since 2011

are exacerbating the region's food insecurity. Loss of income, abrupt breakdowns in food supply chains, and spikes in food prices due to decreased food supply drove the FAO's Food Price Volatility Index in the Arab World to almost twice the world average in 2015.[4]

THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

Syria is a particularly jarring example of the impact that a large-scale conflict has on food insecurity. The Syrian economy and livelihoods continue to deteriorate, with the Syrian gross domestic product (GDP) contracting by at least 40 percent per year since the start of the conflict.[5] This means the number of people in need of direct humanitarian assistance, estimated at 10 million by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in December 2015, is increasing exponentially.[6] Unemployment stood at 57.7 percent at the end of 2014, compared to around 15 percent in 2011.[7] Households spend almost two-thirds of their income on food and are barely able to keep up with the average inflation rate of 40 percent per year since 2011.[8] In addition to the use of starvation as a war tactic, this economic stress has created pockets of significant

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food insecurity—such as the situations in Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, and the rural Damascus suburbs of Moadamiya and eastern Ghouta, where households have financial and physical difficulty accessing food. For instance, the price of a kilogram of bread in Ghouta is 1,333 percent higher than in neighboring districts in Damascus because of the government-imposed siege since 2012.[9] This lack of access to food (together with the lack of access to water, sanitation, and healthcare services) is causing malnutrition, which currently affects 4 million Syrians.[10]

The conflict is also destroying the basis for agriculture and sustainable food security in the long term. Syria moved from producing 3.5 million tons of wheat in 2011, enough to be self-sufficient, to importing almost 2 million tons in 2015.[11] The ongoing displacement and migration of people accelerated the depletion of much-needed labor in rural areas, a problem with which the country was already struggling prior to the conflict.[12] Since 2000, Syria had been gradually losing its agriculture labor—nearly 50 percent of it—to urban migration and government jobs.[13] The additional pressure of displacement is diminishing what little remained of the country's agricultural labor force.

As of December 2015, more than 7.6 million Syrians have been internally displaced, while more than 5 million have been forced to flee the country for Jordan (635,324), Lebanon (1,069,111), Turkey (2,503,549), the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (236,672), Egypt

and North Africa (about 145,685), and Europe. The majority were displaced from Deraa, Aleppo, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor, all major agricultural zones in Syria.[14] Farming lands have been either confiscated or mined by warring parties, transformed into living quarters and camps for the displaced, or simply left behind to become wastelands, diminishing the availability of arable land.

Conflict has also damaged livestock, once a pillar of Syria's agricultural sector and the main income source of many rural households. Since the start of the conflict, the number of cattle herds dropped by 30 percent, sheep and goats by 40 percent, and poultry—the most affordable source of animal protein in Syria—decreased by 50 percent.[15] Farmers lost their livestock due to expropriation by armed groups, increased prices of fodder, and a lack of veterinary services. The replenishment of the livestock sector takes years. In the meantime, food diversity and long-term food security suffer as meat and dairy production declines.

CROSS-BORDER IMPACTS IN LEBANON AND JORDAN

The effects of conflict on agriculture are not confined to countries with active conflict. The Syrian crisis impacts food security in neighboring Lebanon and Jordan through the loss of agricultural exports and trade opportunities, but also more significantly by the strain placed on host communities due to the presence of Syrian refugees.

Though Syria was once a major trading partner for its neighboring countries in food and agriculture, the conflict has reduced the total agricultural trade. Since the start of the Syrian conflict, $700 million has been lost from suspended agricultural trade among Jordan, Iraq, and Syria.[16] The conflict has also led to a drop in transit trade *through* Syria, with a particular impact on small-scale producers and workers along the agriculture supply chains in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. For instance, Lebanese farmers who exported most of their vegetables and fruit to the Gulf countries through Syria were forced to rely on air exports or lose business. The associated costs of exporting have left Lebanese produce uncompetitive in Gulf markets, contributing to the decline in agriculture in Lebanon.[17]

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The influx of millions of Syrian refugees has also put additional stress on neighboring countries' food security. In Jordan, increased demand for bread is straining the govern-

ment's fiscal system and its ability to maintain food subsidies. The government has been struggling to keep up with the subsidy of wheat bread, currently sold at about $50 per ton to private bakeries compared to a market price of $450 per ton.[18] In 2011, at the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Jordan was spending an extra $1.5 million just on food subsidies for Syrian refugees, and this number increased more than twentyfold to $36 million by the end of 2014.[19] In all, Jordan needed $418 million in 2015 to subsidize bread, water, gas, and electricity for the Syrian refugees it hosted outside the official camps.[20]

In Lebanon, large numbers of Syrian refugees have settled among the most vulnerable communities. It is estimated that 86 percent of registered refugees and 65 percent of the poorest Lebanese are concentrated in 215 villages across the country, primarily in the poorer districts of Akkar, Hermel, and Baalbek.[21] In Akkar and Beqaa, food prices increased by an average of 50 percent; of the 1.2 million Lebanese constituting these and other host communities, almost half have been rendered "particularly vulnerable" due to the influx of Syrian refugees.[22] The stress of the influx and its impact on food prices, access to social services, and overall declining economic conditions often result in tense relations between the refugees and the Lebanese—with ethnic and sectarian undertones.

THE VICIOUS CYCLE IN IRAQ AND YEMEN

In Iraq, the Islamic State (IS) has capitalized on food insecurity to add to its appeal. As prices started to increase, access to food deteriorated among Iraqi refugees returning from Syria, incoming Syrian refugees, the displaced (about 10 percent of the Iraqi population), and their host communities.[23] The Public Distribution System (PDS)—a subsidy program started in the Baath era that distributes food commodities (including rice, wheat flour, vegetable oil, sugar, and baby formula) to all Iraqi households—has been dysfunctional in most of Iraq and nonexistent in conflict areas. Sunni Arab governorates, such as Anbar, Salahuddin, Nineveh, and parts of Kirkuk and Diyala—areas IS has targeted for expansion—have been cut off from the PDS since

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2011.[24] Food prices in Anbar have soared higher than in all other governorates, reaching prices that are about 70 percent higher than the prices in Baghdad.[25] The absence of any signs of government support reinforces popular dissatisfaction with the government and creates sentiments of Sunni alienation.

The Islamic State exploited this lack of access to food—one of many social and political grievances—in its initial foray into Iraq. By controlling the water supplies on the

Tigris and Euphrates and the wheat and barley silos in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State worked on building its own social safety net and food subsidy system. Using its control of both the Syrian and the Iraqi wheat harvests of 2014 and the confiscated livestock from displaced farmers, the Islamic State forced meat prices down and provided subsidies for the communities under its control. This strategy not only bought loyalty and obedience, but it also created dependency—to the extent that meat prices in Mosul were half that of those found in Erbil in 2015.[26]

Furthermore, Iraq's agricultural production declined in 2014 and 2015 by around 1 million tons,[27] particularly in the northern areas that normally contribute a large share of wheat and barley production. Salahuddin and Nineveh governorates, at the center of the current conflict with IS, which normally produce nearly one-third of the total annual national wheat and barley production, have had their agricultural production nearly cut in half since 2013.[28] Lost income in farming and agriculture and the lack of alternatives have been driving farming families to find other ways to generate income, including joining jihadi and militia groups.[29] For instance, when facing the challenges of cultivating their land or selling their crops, Arab farmers in northern Nineveh believed they had no choice but to join IS and retreat with it along with their families as the Kurdish

> Together with displacement, unemployment, and sectarianism, food insecurity leaves Iraqis ripe for radicalization, which is prolonging the Iraqi conflict.

forces started regaining these areas from IS in late 2015.[30] With about 3 million people displaced within Iraq, many of whom have been repeatedly displaced from and within these governorates, almost one out of four internally displaced households is using negative coping strategies—reducing food intake or resorting to begging, prostitution, and theft—opening the door for more instability and vulnerability to recruitment by terrorist groups. Together with displacement, unemployment, and sectarianism, food insecurity leaves Iraqis ripe for radicalization, which is prolonging the Iraqi conflict.

Iraq's financial woes—due to ongoing conflict, poor fiscal management, high corruption, and lower oil prices—have limited the government's ability to procure and buy agricultural production at subsidized rates from the local farmers since 2014. Unable to compete with cheaper Turkish and Iranian agricultural imports, farmers in Iraq cannot sell their crops to the government's subsidized procurement program either. With the previous two agricultural seasons down the drain and 2016 looking even gloomier—and with farmers unable to trade or store their agricultural output, as most silos and warehouses in conflict areas are either destroyed or under IS control—farmers in Iraq have nowhere to turn.[31]

Similarly, in Yemen conflict and food insecurity have become inextricably linked. With one of the lowest human development indicators in the region, Yemen has long been facing a whole host of issues, among them endemic poverty, long-standing underdevelopment, and water shortages. Now Yemen faces a greater stress: food shortages. In 2015, Yemen already had the highest food import dependency among Arab countries, importing up to 95 percent of its staple foods.[32] The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen that began that year has rendered the country even more vulnerable to food insecurity as the Yemeni rial depreciates, food prices spike, and import bills soar. In areas affected by conflict, reports indicate that the prices of food and fuel staples, particularly onions and cooking gas, have increased by more than 80 percent compared to pre-crisis levels.[33] Governorates from which the Houthi expansion originated—Saada, Hajjah, and Amran—have experienced severe malnutrition since 2012.[34] Governorates such as al-Jawf, Taiz, and al-Hudaydah—where the conflict eventually spread to—have also been part of the severe malnutrition belt surrounding Sanaa.

Two-thirds of Yemenis—around 2.5 million households—derive their livelihoods from agricultural jobs (e.g., farmers, pastoralists, fishermen, and agricultural wage laborers).[35] The current conflict has significantly damaged farms, storage, and irrigation facilities in governorates like Saada, Lahj, Amran, Taiz, al-Dali, and Abyan. With a damaged agricultural infrastructure, degraded soil, scarce water, and fuel shortages, farmers have been squeezed by high input costs and low output prices. With no alternative industries and a decaying government structure, they have been left to negative coping strategies that included migration southward or joining the fight on behalf of one group or another.[36] These negative coping strategies, like in Iraq and Syria, are intensifying the conflict.

FOOD INSECURITY: A DRIVER OF CONFLICT?

Local and regional wars and conflicts are claiming lives not only through violence and destruction but also by jeopardizing a basic human need—food. Hundreds of thousands of besieged Syrians are starving, with dozens of deaths reported in Yarmouk, Zabadani, Madaya, Kefraya, and Fouaa in December 2015 and January 2016 alone—a stark reminder of the ongoing deterioration of food insecurity amid conflict.[37]

Furthermore, food insecurity adds to the intensity of conflicts and the fragility of the region as communities are struggling to access food, both physically and economically. Attempts to understand the instability in Arab countries often focus on geopolitics, religion, and ideology, overlooking practical issues, such as the availability of and access to food, which can intensify conflicts and become drivers of instability.[38] It is important to remember that popular frustration with Arab governments' inability to cope with increasing food prices—part of the global rise in food prices in 2008 but particularly in 2010—had compounded political grievances and sweeping disaffection with state governance.[39] The

grievances and disaffection contributed to the protests of 2011 and provided a stark reminder of these countries' vulnerabilities.[40] Today, food insecurity is increasingly not only the result of instability but also a contributor to it, adding to the intractability of internal conflicts, regional wars, and overall vulnerability of the region and its people.

A Palestinian man walks in the middle of one of Hebron's main streets on January 7, 2012, beside the Israeli separation wall, which the International Court of Justice declared illegal in 2004. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict has seemingly receded into the background as domestic turmoil and conflict has spread in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings of 2011.

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MAHMOUD JARABA AND LIHI BEN SHITRIT

THE TIME OF THE ACTIVIST? THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT IN A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST

NO LONGER A PRIORITY?

The Arab uprisings and their aftermath have destabilized regimes, created or intensified cleavages, and redrawn the political geography of the Middle East. But five years on, where have these regional developments left the long-standing question of Palestine, the Israeli occupation, and the Arab-Israeli conflict? On the surface, it seems that regional turmoil has pushed Palestine off the agenda for most of these countries, to the detriment of the Palestinian cause. In addition, the United Nations (UN) Security Council's P5+1 agreement with Iran, which some believed might put pressure on Israel, seems to only strengthen Israel's regional position due to the counterbalancing it is likely to generate. Arab states wary of Iran's growing power in the Middle East have a common interest with Israel, a fact that brings these players closer in their effort to maintain a balance against Iran. Yet in many ways, the further marginalization of the Palestinian issue, due to shifting regional priorities, simply brought into sharper focus a long-standing state of affairs: that for most of these actors the issue was no longer a priority. Notwithstanding fiery rhetoric, claims to solidarity, and even some material or military support, little effort has been made to advance Palestinian statehood. So while the entire region is experiencing upheavals, fissures, and realignments, the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—characterized by asymmetrical violence, settlement expansion, and endless occupation—appear to remain the one stable feature of the region.

But there is also some change. The recent state of affairs has forced Palestinians to look to themselves, reevaluate their options and seek new means to pressure Israel to end its occupation. This new Palestinian post-Arab Spring reality has manifested on three levels: domestic, regional, and international. On the domestic and regional levels, Palestinian politics is in shambles and, as in the past, unlikely to improve Palestinian prospects for statehood. The internationalization of the conflict through international organizations—like the United Nations and the International Criminal Court (ICC), the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and "glocal" (global-local) activism—looks to have the most transformative potential. Other local options, such as the Palestinian withdrawal from the Oslo agreement, the dismantling of the Palestinian Authority (PA), or a violent upheaval in the form of a third intifada, remain a constant specter. However, as Palestinians observe the devastating violence that armed resistance and the breakup of state institutions has wrought across the region, these courses of action seem to entail guaranteed risks more than any tangible results.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

In the Palestinian territories, the Arab Spring protests briefly reverberated and brought people out to the streets. In many countries people demanded the fall of their regime (*isqat al-nizam*), but in Palestine protesters called for an end to the bloody split (*inha' al-inqisam*) between Fatah and Hamas. And indeed momentarily, reconciliation of the rival factions, who have been oscillating between a cold war and all-out violence since their 2007 clash that brought the West Bank under Fatah and Gaza under Hamas, appeared possible. Hamas's decision to side with the opposition across the region by supporting the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the uprising in Syria ultimately proved detrimental and pushed the organization into a corner. Bashar al-Assad's benefactors in Iran cut off their financial and military aid to Hamas, and the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood in a military coup in 2013 further tightened the stranglehold on Hamas and the Gaza Strip as Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi dismantled the tunnel economy. Reconciliation with Fatah looked like the only way out of isolation for Hamas, and the organization's weakness was something on which Fatah could have capitalized.

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But ultimately, hopes of reconciliation proved unfounded. The split between Hamas and Fatah remained as it was before the Arab Spring. Even though both parties signed the

Shati' Agreement in April 2014 and formed a unity government, on the ground unity was hardly felt. In summer 2015, the Palestinian Authority arrested hundreds of Hamas activists in the West Bank, and the parliamentary elections that the Shati' Agreement promised are still nowhere in sight. What is more, even if elections take place, they will likely only entrench the division between the factions and their respective control over the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinians are now increasingly pessimistic—recent opinion polls show that 59 percent believe reconciliation is bound to fail.[1]

Making matters worse, the Hamas-Fatah split has been accompanied by growing factionalization within each party. Fatah continues to suffer a crisis of legitimacy. Widespread corruption in PA institutions and the failure of Fatah's strategy to pursue Palestinian independence through negotiations with Israel put Fatah in the same tight spot it was in before the 2006 elections, which led to a Hamas victory. Mahmoud Abbas, the eighty-year-old Palestinian president, is under attack from his rivals in Fatah who seek to replace him. His recent conflict with Yasser Abed Rabbo, the secretary of the Palestine Liberation Organization's executive committee, is yet another iteration of a never-ending series of challenges to Abbas's leadership.[2] Alongside the challenge from longtime rival Mohammad Dahlan, who enjoys support among some Fatah members, especially in Gaza,[3] these rivalries prevent Fatah from conducting internal elections for its institutions, further stripping the movement of democratic pretense.

Hamas is also rife with internal disagreements. Since Iran severed its ties with Hamas in 2012, debate has raged in the movement about the future of its strategic alliances in the region. Some Hamas leaders, like Mahmoud al-Zahar, and members of the movement's armed wing, the Qassam Brigades, hope to rehabilitate relations with Iran. Others in Hamas's political bureau under Khaled Meshaal hope to move closer to the Saudi axis. Hamas's support for the Arab coalition fighting the Houthi rebels in Yemen and Meshaal's recent visit to Saudi Arabia point in the direction of a new strategic partnership. But the relationship between the Qassam Brigades and Iran were especially close before the Syrian civil war, with Iran providing valuable rocket technology and funding for military and civilian expenses. Some in Hamas still see their interest with Iran rather than with the Arab states. Even during last summer's war in Gaza, Qassam Brigades spokesperson Abu Obeida thanked Iran for supporting the armed struggle before mentioning Qatar and Turkey, who have channeled funds toward Gaza's reconstruction.[4] Leaders in the Qassam Brigades now hope that the P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran and the lifting of sanctions will also lead to renewed ties and the resumption of the flow of funds to Hamas's military infrastructure to pay for salaries and public services in the Gaza Strip. Regional realignments and the likely emergence of Iran as an even stronger regional hegemon after the lifting of sanctions threaten to further exacerbate internal divisions within Hamas.

REGIONAL DYNAMICS

The Israeli government has avoided taking an official stand on the events of the Arab Spring and uprisings. It was dismayed by the fall of Mubarak but continued coordinating with Mohamed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government and was relieved by Sisi's ascent in Egypt. Israel has been outspoken about what it considers the destabilizing influence of Iran in the region through its support for Hezbollah, and it has secretly offered some medical help to wounded Syrian rebels close to its border in the Golan Heights. But Israel also considers Assad to be a safer long-term neighbor than the Islamist militias that are fighting him, thus Israel has focused its sparse actions in Syria on countering Hezbollah rather than Assad. The nuclear deal with Iran, however, puts Israel squarely in the Saudi camp. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu argued in his speech to the U.S. Congress on March 3, 2015, that in Israel's eyes there is no difference between Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Islamic State—all are terrorists threatening Israel and the region.[5] Therefore, Israel presents itself as a partner to Sunni Arab states in their regional balancing against Iran.

The Israeli government has been using regional turmoil and violence to argue against making any concessions to the Palestinians. In its 2015 election campaign, Netanyahu's Likud Party claimed that the Labor Party's and the Israeli left's talk of ceding territories to the Palestinians would place the Islamic State at the border of Israeli cities and is therefore a grave mistake. The right-wing Israeli government has no desire for a settlement; Arab states are more concerned with Iran, growing sectarianism, terrorism, and Islamic opposition than they are with Palestine; and the United States is busy juggling Iran and Saudi Arabia. All of these factors make a negotiated agreement between Israel and the Palestinians as distant as it has ever been.

There are, of course, scenarios that could help push toward a settlement, but these remain hypothetical. For instance, if Hamas's realignment with the Saudi camp progresses as Khaled Meshaal intends, Arab states could work to facilitate intra-Palestinian reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. However, given the state of Palestinian politics, and the expected benefits for the Qassam Brigades of edging toward a post-sanctions Iran, such a development would be very difficult to achieve. The Arab states could also reignite the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which proposed normalization with Israel in return for establishing a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders. But again, the prioritization of Arab States' concerns about Iran and the presence of an extreme right-wing government in Israel make the successful resuscitation of that plan highly unlikely.

Much has been made over Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's threat made during his speech to the UN to withdraw from the Oslo Accords and force Israel to reoccupy the entire West Bank.[6] Yet this has remained no more than a threat. The PA has taken no significant steps in this direction since the speech and has continued the close security coordination with Israel that was stipulated in the accords.[7] Finally, over the past few years,

waves of sporadic and uncoordinated violence—characterized by individual Palestinian attacks against Israeli military personnel and civilians—repeatedly threatened, at least in the eyes of the media, to spread into an armed intifada. The latest round of these attacks, which started in Jerusalem in late 2015, is another iteration of this phenomenon. However, the PA has been able to contain and prevent the spread of violent grassroots resistance in the territories it controls. But beyond the work of the Palestinian and Israeli security services, Palestinians themselves have been wearied by the aftermath of the second intifada and the violence engulfing the region and are therefore unlikely to participate en masse in an armed uprising similar to the second intifada.

INTERNATIONAL AND "GLOCAL" ACTIVISM

Not putting their hopes in the Arab states or Israel, Palestinian leadership has redoubled efforts in the post-Arab Spring period to internationalize the Palestinian issue. To increase pressure on Israel, the Palestinian Authority has sought the recognition of its statehood from or membership in international bodies such as the UN and the ICC. On November 29, 2012, the UN General Assembly accorded Palestine the status of a "non-member observer state." A total of 138 countries voted in favor of this status upgrade, while nine opposed it and 41 abstained. This move encouraged the Palestinians to take the matter to the UN Security Council and seek recognition from this influential body. In 2014, their bid to establish a Palestinian state by 2017 failed, with eight countries voting in favor, five abstaining, and two (the United States and Australia) objecting. Mahmoud Abbas plans to present a new bid in the near future, hoping that this time support from Europe (particularly from France), will resonate internationally—even if the United States eventually vetoes the decision.[8] In April 2015, Palestine also officially joined the International Criminal Court in The Hague. This will allow Palestinians to present claims against the crimes of the occupation in the ICC and receive international attention—and potentially incur sanctions against specific Israeli military and political leaders, further internationalizing their struggle.

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On a global-local level, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, established in 2005, has garnered greater attention in the past three years. The movement aims to pressure Israel to end its occupation by employing tactics that helped end apartheid in South Africa. Recently, it has achieved some noteworthy success on academic campuses across the United States and Europe and among some high-profile artists and public figures. Its

economic impact has been limited but significant. For example, according to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, the European boycott of Israeli settlements' agricultural products has resulted in a loss of $6 billion in 2013 and 2014, and this loss is expected to rise to $9.5 billion by the end of 2015.[9] In the West Bank and Gaza, an economic boycott has been difficult to implement due to these territories' near-complete dependence on the Israeli economy. Nevertheless, activism around this issue is growing, and the BDS movement hopes to position itself as the main nonviolent vehicle for fighting the occupation.

To truly bring about a change in Palestinian reality through an end of the occupation, the BDS movement faces two formidable obstacles. First, despite some international success, the movement has been unable to mobilize large numbers of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. This is due to the severe economic burden that a Palestinian boycott of Israel would entail. The Palestinian Authority is a signatory to the Paris Protocol, which limits its control over the Palestinian economy, and Israel controls border crossings and taxes imports entering the territories.[10] In addition, Palestinians are currently extremely dependent on Israeli goods, and their ability to replace these goods with local products remains miniscule.[11] The BDS movement will have to work hard to convince Palestinians that the hardships would pay off in their long-term fight against the occupation. To date, BDS's main impact in Palestine has been felt in the academic and cultural realm. It has also been somewhat pronounced in pressure against grassroots peace activists who work on joint Israeli-Palestinian initiatives—a tactic that appears counterproductive, as it has mainly harmed activists who advocate against the occupation and has prevented the BDS message from reaching new audiences in Israel.

The second obstacle is the engagement of the Israeli public. The Israeli government's *hasbara* (propaganda) effort to counter the BDS campaign has not only been directed internationally, but also internally at Israeli audiences. Israeli politicians and media have repeatedly argued that the BDS campaign is motivated by antisemitism. They have claimed that the movement aims to eliminate Israel and deny the right of the Jewish people to self-determination while upholding the Palestinians' claim to sovereignty over the entire land from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. Israeli politicians and media present BDS as a zero-sum game in which, even if Israel withdrew to the 1967 borders, dismantled settlements, divided Jerusalem, and arrived at a negotiated solution to the refugee problem, it would still be a target for boycott until it ceased to exist. As long as large segments of the Israeli public believe this narrative, even the most successful boycott campaign would not achieve the end of the occupation. The Israeli elections on March 17, 2015, showed that economically underprivileged Israelis tend to vote for the hawkish right, while the more affluent vote for parties advocating a settlement with the Palestinians.[12] In a scenario that is still beyond BDS's dreams—to be so successful as to effect the economic and diplomatic isolation of Israel—the result would in all likelihood further benefit the pro-occupation right wing. To be effective, BDS would need to counter *hasbara* within Israel by targeting Israeli audiences for its message and reaching those

whose information about the BDS's objectives is filtered through the Israeli government and media's vilification.

Other forms of nonviolent activism also continue on the ground in both Palestine and Israel. In East Jerusalem, Palestinian residents have been demonstrating continuously since 2014 in what has looked like a mini-intifada. In Israeli prisons, Palestinian administrative detainees have gone on hunger strikes to protest their illegal arrests. Palestinians and Israelis have been protesting together against the destruction of the West Bank village of Susiya and against the demolition of Bedouin villages in the Negev Desert. In Israel, the Women Wage Peace movement brought hundreds of women to fast for a peaceful end to the occupation in front of the prime minister's house for fifty days in summer 2015—one day for each day of fighting during the 2014 Gaza war. The Breaking the Silence organization has been collecting and publishing the testimonies of hundreds of Israel Defense Forces officers and soldiers about human rights violations by the military. These are just a few examples of countless activist initiatives taking place every day on the ground. However, the resources at the disposal of such movements remain negligible.

A PUSH FOR CHANGE

The violent turmoil in the Middle East, into which the promise of the Arab Spring disintegrated, appears initially to have pushed the Palestinian issue even further away from a resolution. The regional powers are preoccupied with an Arab-Iranian rivalry and fear internal opposition to their regimes. The dynamics of impasse remain the same. Domestic Palestinian politics is still factionalized, and Israel is still under a right-wing hawkish government bent on settlement expansion. Regionally, Sunni Arab regimes still have little to show for their alleged efforts toward Palestinian statehood. And yet growing frustration at the impotence of domestic and regional politics is opening the door for grassroots and glocal activism, nonviolent protest, and international attention to continue to grow, inspire, and push for a change to the status quo.
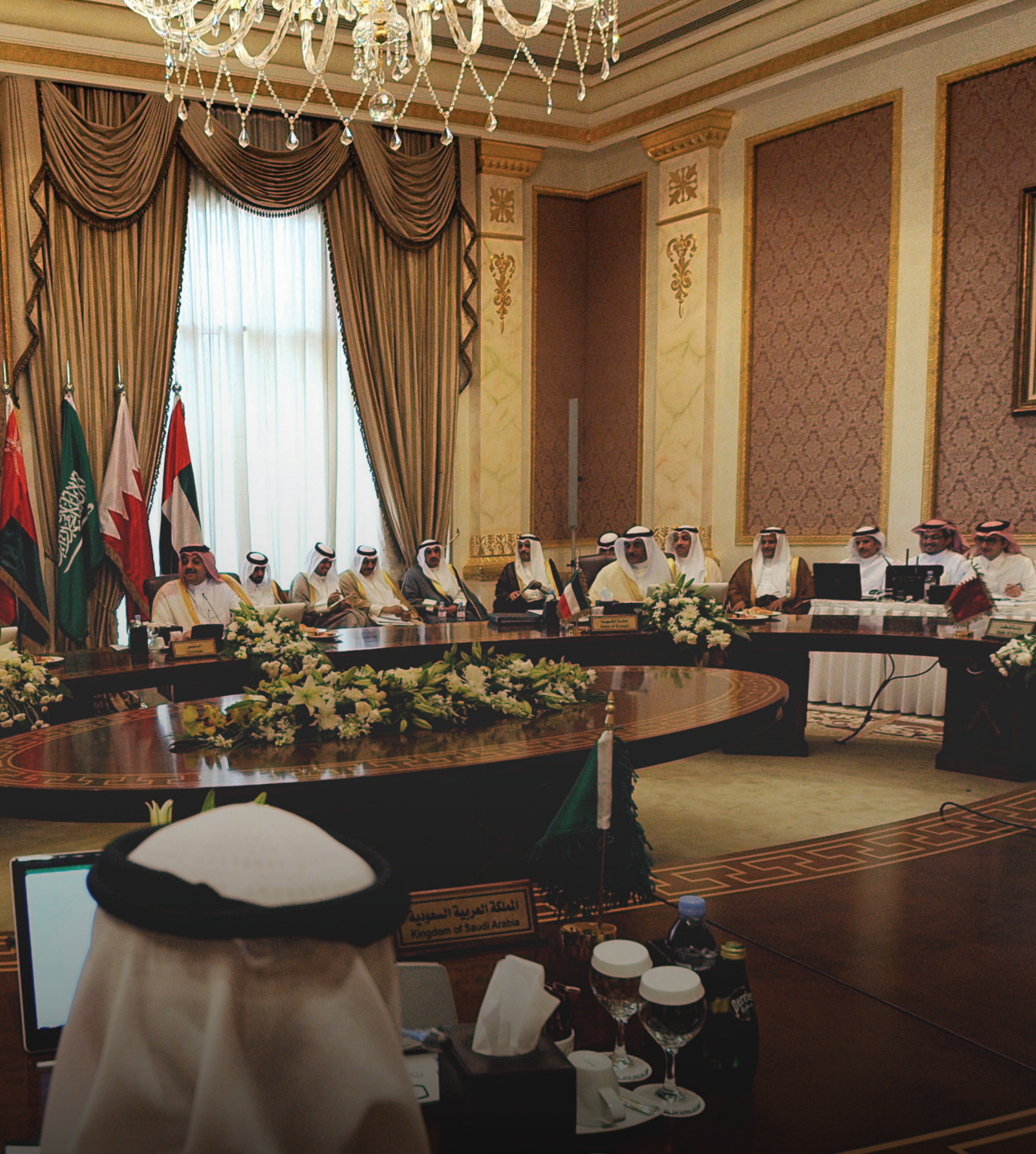
Foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states attend a meeting on June 11, 2015 in Riyadh. Despite initial policy divergence between member states, Arab Gulf states ultimately found greater unity amid regional challenges and have increasingly coordinated their active foreign policies.

SULIMAN AL-ATIQI

GREATER SOLIDARITY: GCC UNITY AMID REGIONAL TURMOIL

STRONGER TOGETHER

The turmoil of 2011 exposed greater policy divides among Gulf states on key regional developments. Over the past five years, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has grappled with the absence of a single powerful Arab state to which it could anchor itself and—for the first time since the formation of the council—found itself forced to take on a greater leadership role in Arab and Middle Eastern affairs. The situation was further compounded when the United States, the bloc's traditional ally, began pursuing a policy of disengagement from the region that further exposed GCC states' vulnerabilities, particularly vis-à-vis Iran. This first yielded less coordinated foreign policy responses to developments in the region, pitting Qatar against Saudi Arabia. This schism was on full display when the ambassadors of three GCC states withdrew from Qatar in March 2014. Yet despite initial policy differences and the resulting diplomatic crises since the start of the Arab uprisings in 2011, GCC unity stands the test of time. Regional threats have increased solidarity and cooperation among the GCC states, expediting the expansion of the council's security functions and capabilities.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

Two factors have particularly strengthened GCC solidarity over the past few years: a U.S. policy of limited engagement, which ran counter to what Gulf monarchies wanted from its ally in the Middle East, and growing Iranian influence in the region.

With regard to the United States, Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, did not hide their dissatisfaction and concern when President Barack Obama called on then Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to step down at the height of the Tahrir Square protests in early 2011.[1] Mubarak was a long-time partner of Saudi Arabia in counterbalancing Iranian influence in the region, and his removal was regarded as a severe blow to the monarchies of the Gulf—with the exception of Qatar, which sided with the protesters at the time. The United States turning on a long-term ally in the wake of popular protests raised concerns that Gulf rulers might face a similar fate. This was particularly alarming, as Mubarak had also been considered a reliable ally for the United States.

The next and more serious event was what Gulf states perceived was the premature withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq at the end of 2011. Gulf monarchies were wary of the emerging Shia elite that were dominating Iraqi politics while the Sunni population was increasingly marginalized. The GCC states had recognized and anticipated that the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq would further increase Iran's growing influence on their doorstep. Indeed, since then—and especially after the Islamic State (IS) seized the northern city of Mosul, the second-largest in the country, in the summer of 2014—Iran's military cooperation with Iraq has grown, and military advisers are helping various Shia militias fight the Islamic State. In the GCC countries' view, this granted Tehran unprecedented influence in the Arabian Peninsula.

Another major event that had a lasting impression on the Gulf states was President Obama's statements in August 2013 that walked back his promise that the use of chemical weapons in Syria marked a red line for the United States. Far from the military response that the Gulf states were hoping for to tilt the balance of the stagnated Syrian civil war in favor of the rebels, in September 2013 the United States opted for a deal brokered by Russia that would see the removal and destruction of chemical weapons stockpiles in Syria.[2] The event signaled to the Gulf monarchies the extent of U.S. resolve to avoid any kind of military intervention in Syria. Saudi Arabia's vehement disapproval of this course of action manifested a month later, when the kingdom turned down a seat it had exerted tremendous effort to acquire at the United Nations Security Council. Saudi officials singled out the use of chemical weapons in Damascus as "irrefutable evidence and proof of the inability of the Security Council to carry out its duties and responsibilities."[3]

> Gulf monarchs feared the deal—through cash injections and economic growth that would likely support Iran's foreign policy agenda—was undoing their efforts to contain Iran's projection of power in Arab affairs.

The final and perhaps the most significant point of contention was the U.S.-Iran interim deal that was struck late that same year and saw Tehran commit to a temporary suspension of all nuclear enrichment above 5 percent in exchange for an estimated $6–7 billion worth of sanctions relief.[4] The Gulf states were particularly incensed that they were neither consulted on nor privy to the negotiations—a traditional area of cooperation between the two allies. No less unsettling was that Gulf monarchies understood the deal as a general U.S.-Iran rapprochement and a means for further political, economic, and security cooperation in the region. No sooner had the agreement been inked in July 2015 than Western businesses were racing to secure opportunities in an untapped market.[5] Gulf monarchs feared that the deal, through cash injections and economic growth that would likely support Iran's foreign policy agenda, was undoing their efforts to contain Iran's projection of power in Arab affairs. Hence, these external factors pushed the GCC toward unity and self-reliance.

INTERNAL DYNAMICS AND REGIONAL UNREST

Increasing U.S.-GCC tension had been driving calls by senior Saudi officials for greater self-reliance and less dependence on the West in facing regional challenges. In the lead-up to the GCC summit of December 2013, the growing sense of urgency amid regional unrest prompted the kingdom to revisit its 2011 call to upgrade the GCC into a union less than a month after the U.S.-Iran interim agreement was presented. Though details of the proposed upgrade were not released, the notion was rather unrealistic given the differences in each country's domestic politics. For example, the Kuwaiti parliament was unlikely to ratify such an agreement even if the government approved, and Oman was unlikely to abandon its distinct and more neutral foreign policy only to be bounded by such a union's collective decisions. However, the call was indicative of the pressing mood to react to regional developments much more coherently. Hence, the summit resulted in an approval to form a unified military command and plans for a joint police force to help confront growing threats in the region.[6]

This period also witnessed a significant increase in military spending in the GCC, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) featuring among the top fifteen military spenders of 2013—a trend that would continue through the following year.[7] However, the unified military command and increased military expenditure were not enough. Saudi Arabia sought to further unify its neighborhood to enhance the GCC's ability to respond to increasing threats and a more assertive Iran. To ensure the GCC would be prepared for more unified action, Saudi Arabia orchestrated a diplomatic crisis with Qatar—estranged from the other Gulf states on regional security policies since the start of the Arab uprisings—in a drastic attempt to bring the tiny country back in line with the rest of the GCC. Gulf monarchs were particularly troubled by Qatar's fervent support of the Muslim Brotherhood (banned by both Saudi Arabia and the UAE), which was seen as

undermining GCC efforts to stabilize Egypt and ensure its support. In March 2014, the Emirati, Saudi, and Bahraini ambassadors were recalled from Doha, signaling the council's deep dissatisfaction with Qatar's policies.[8] The withdrawal exerted tremendous pressure on Qatar—set to host the GCC summit later that year—to step back in line with the rest of the monarchies. In a sign of reconciliation, Qatar expelled leading Muslim Brotherhood figures and accepted a Saudi-sponsored reconciliation effort with Egypt.[9] It seemed diplomacy prevailed, as soon afterward ambassadors were reinstalled and the GCC summit proceeded as scheduled in December 2014. By the end of the year, Qatar suspended *Mubasher Misr*—its Egypt-focused *Al Jazeera* channel, which was a major irritant to Egyptian authorities—and officially announced its full support for Egypt and the "political program of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi."[10] Once Qatar was back in the fold, collective security measures ensued, including the creation of a naval force based in Bahrain and a joint police force, dubbed "GCC-POL," to be headquartered in Abu Dhabi.[11]

COOPERATION ON THE PENINSULA

Growing regional threats and a less responsive Western ally has brought the GCC a sense of urgency to enact security reforms and more unified regional policies. Although collective security measures were just the first step of the urgently needed reforms to address regional challenges, lessons from the past few years show that in times of crisis the political will to overlook differences to overcome threats is as present as ever.

The culmination of GCC solidarity was evident in Saudi Arabia's Operation Decisive Storm against the Iran-backed Houthi militias in late March 2015—with the contribution of all GCC states except Oman.[12] The Saudi-led air campaign was particularly brazen, as it was initiated without prior U.S. consent, indicating the GCC's willingness to act without its long-term ally. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE share most of the burden, Bahrain and Qatar have also committed troops to the effort, and Kuwait reportedly contributed fifteen fighter aircraft.[13]

Though regional threats abound, what is driving this particular effort is the Saudi conviction that if another Iran-backed, Hezbollah-like militia gains security control of a neighboring state, it would create an unmanageable security threat. Up until that point, sporadic clashes with the Houthis on a smaller scale did not pose a serious threat to the kingdom.

Though the operation may or may not ultimately tip the balance in Saudi Arabia's favor, it does showcase increased military capabilities to effectively implement an aerial and naval blockade. The naval blockade—to which food shortages that compound the humanitarian crisis in Yemen are attributed—has effectively implemented a "blanket policy" of blocking the majority of vessels approaching Yemeni ports, barring inspected humanitarian aid vessels.[14] For instance, by late April 2015, the Saudis felt compelled to destroy the runway

of Sanaa's airport to prevent the landing of an Iranian aircraft that had "refused to coordinate with the coalition."[15] In mid-May 2015, a Yemen-bound cargo ship of Iranian aid was warned that it would not be allowed to dock at the Red Sea port of Hodeida without inspection. The saga ended with a face-saving measure that saw the vessel dock in Djibouti, where humanitarian aid to Yemen is being coordinated by the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Despite claims from Iran's deputy chief of staff that the "self-restraint of the Islamic Republic of Iran is not limitless,"[16] it is clear that a status quo has been established vis-à-vis Yemen, in which Saudi military projection on the peninsula is absolute and understood as inviolable. Though the United States and the United Kingdom support the Saudi-led coalition with logistical, planning, and intelligence support, the initiative represents the most extensive security initiative attempted by the GCC, by far. The effort is also instructive of the new leadership role in which the GCC finds itself. Despite this being a Saudi-led effort, the GCC states have successfully involved troops from other Arab countries, including Sudan and Egypt—making this a Saudi-led, GCC-Arab military intervention, an unprecedented development.

> It is clear that a status quo has been established vis-à-vis Yemen, in which Saudi military projection on the peninsula is absolute and understood as inviolable.

Another example of closer collaboration among GCC countries is the joint effort by Saudi Arabia and Qatar on the Syrian front. Since at least May 2015, reports have confirmed closer coordination between the two alongside Turkey in supporting a coalition of groups—including Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, despite U.S. concerns—which contributed to the rebel advance and takeover of Idlib.[17] The Qatari minister of foreign affairs in October 2015 entertained the idea of a military intervention in Syria alongside Saudi Arabia and Turkey.[18] While the Gulf states would be wary of opening a military intervention on a second front, it is likely there will be increased coordination regarding which rebels to support and bandwagoning on a prospective intervention from outside—such as a Turkey-led no fly zone.

GREAT UNITY AHEAD

Diverging U.S. policy in the region and growing Iranian interference in Arab affairs have pushed the GCC toward greater unity, seen as a fundamental pillar of security and legitimacy. This is becoming the norm for Gulf monarchies, which in light of regional turmoil seek to rise above policy differences.

Flexibility in the GCC model allows the states to respond to threats without unanimous consensus. Member states meet under the banner of the GCC, but if there are differences (as is usually the case), this is not a hurdle toward action. In the case of Yemen, Oman rejected the Saudi initiative, but conceded that it cannot stop other GCC members from acting multilaterally in the absence of a GCC-led initiative.

The GCC's flexibility has also been leveraged as a strength, particularly in times of crisis. For example, when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar, Kuwait's neutrality allowed it to effectively mediate a way out of the crisis. Oman's neutrality toward Iran and its refusal to join the Saudi-led coalition has allowed it to play the role of regional mediator—most recently negotiating with the Houthis to release Saudi citizens held in Yemen—and will likely prove to be an important player in any peace talks in the conflict.

> The limited role the United States is willing to play in the region has both frustrated Gulf monarchs and, more importantly, awakened them to a new reality with which they will have to cope.

The limited role the United States is willing to play in the region has both frustrated Gulf monarchs and, more importantly, awakened them to a new reality with which they will have to cope. The U.S.-GCC Camp David Summit that took place in May 2015 proved a point on this, starting with the Saudi king's last-minute withdrawal from attending. Though the recently appointed Saudi foreign minister, Adel Al-Jubeir, rebuffed interpretations that the move was intended as a snub,[19] his absence—along with that of the king of Bahrain and the sultan of Oman—points to the disillusionment that there can be a meaningful outcome, as indeed the summit failed to produce.

As outlined in the U.S.-GCC joint statement, although the United States still views the GCC as a strategic partner for security cooperation (especially in counter-terrorism, maritime security, and cybersecurity), the United States has little appetite to intervene militarily in response to regional threats for anything short of an imminent existential threat to a GCC state.[20] This limited commitment will only give the GCC a greater sense of urgency to operationalize and consolidate its recently announced, upgraded institutional arrangements in the field of security, as it will drive GCC states to make their own plans on shaping the region's outcomes with or without the United States.

How much cooperation will be feasible in places like Syria and Libya beyond the peninsula, where it has successfully projected aerial and naval power? To what extent will it influence outcomes? These are key issues to consider in the coming years in order to understand the limits and promise of GCC security cooperation.

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