



Middle East Studies In Review

2016-2017

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Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

About Marine Corps University

Marine Corps University (MCU), also known as Education Command (EDCOM), oversees a series of schools that Marines attend progressively throughout their careers, regardless of military occupations. Incorporating teaching approaches common to any higher education institution, the combined military and civilian professor faculty strives to foster critical thinking and decision-making skills through a balance of directed readings and writings, guest lectures, historical case studies, small-group discussions, military planning exercises, and shared experiences. The Commission of Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools has accredited MCU to award three masters degrees.

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Resident programs present a unique learning opportunity in that they allow sister service, inter-agency, and foreign service students to participate in the education and exchange of ideas with Marine students. Non-resident programs are also critical to the education of the force, as the majority of officer and enlisted Marines pursue education via distance education rather than resident instruction.

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MES Mission Statement

Envisioned in 2007 as an open-source PME resource on Iran for MCU and fleet commanders and expanded to align with Marine Corps needs and requirements, the Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University (MES) serves as the Marine Corps' center of expertise on the Greater Middle East, to include parts of South and Central Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea regions, to deepen the Marine Corps' understanding of these critical regions through professional military education and to link the Marine Corps to the broader academic, intergovernmental, and international communities of knowledge and practice in Middle Eastern studies.

Middle East Studies (MES) accomplishes this mission by:

- 1) Analyzing and assessing current events, regional trends, U.S. foreign policy decisions and strategies, and the cultural and historical complexities and interconnectivity of these regions;
- 2) Conducting and publishing academic research;
- 3) Developing curriculum and delivering classes, supporting student papers and masters theses, and offering lectures and discussions to MCU schools and other U.S. Armed Forces professional military education institutions and onboard U.S. naval vessels;
- 4) Hosting lectures and seminars on board MCU;
- 5) Providing lectures and discussions to other U.S. government agencies, foreign governments and militaries, including NATO schools, and academia;
- 6) Representing the MCU at seminars and professional forums related to MES's areas of responsibility by participation and professional engagement;
- 7) Building relationships and networks with sister service PME institutions and the broader academic, intergovernmental, and international communities of knowledge and practice in Middle Eastern studies;
- 8) Developing and maintaining the academic expertise to ensure the Marine Corps has a flexible, proactive asset as the needs and requirements of the Corps in the region evolve; and
- 9) Hosting and mentoring MCU international fellows, external interns, and Marines assigned to MES.

Forward

Since 2010, the Marine Corps University's Middle East Studies has presented internal and partnered research and analysis in three different forms to enrich the Marine Corps' understanding of the complex security environment of the Middle East and to provide accessible, relevant information for Marines, the broader defense community, and academia. The Middle East Studies Occasional Paper Series disseminates original, peer-reviewed research papers on a wide variety of subjects pertaining to the Greater Middle East, to include parts of South and Central Asia as well Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea regions. The MES Monograph Series focuses on timely subjects of strategic relevance to the current and future US Professional Military Education community and is meant to be published quickly to address fast-developing situations. The third and final publication forum is the Middle East Studies *Insights*, published bi-monthly since January 2010 as the newsletter of MES. This publication features short analytical pieces as well as information on events organized by MES and provides a forum for debate with our readers. In April 2012, we published *Middle East Studies in Review 2010-2011*, which presented in one volume articles from the first two years of MES *Insights*. We continued this in 2014 with the publication of *Middle East Studies in Review 2012-2013*, which included articles from volumes three and four of MES *Insights*. In 2016, the *Middle East Studies in Review* featured articles from volumes five and six of the MES *Insights*.

It gives me great pleasure to present the fourth installment, *Middle East Studies Review 2016-2017*, with articles from volumes seven and eight of MES *Insights*. The articles fall within four categories: Iran, Middle East and North Africa (MENA) democratization, terrorism, and great power competition, regional geopolitics, and internal wars in the MENA. Seven examine different themes related to Iran, and four articles review US foreign policy in the Middle East. Other themes covered include future of democracy in Egypt, an insider view of terrorism in Turkey, Russia's reengagement in the Middle East, Iranian and Russian roles in Afghanistan, the crisis in Yemen, and lone wolf terrorism written by a summer research intern at MES from Virginia Military Institute. The *Review* also informs readers of MES activities and of selected engagements by MES staff during 2016 and 2017.

The articles in the *Review* represent the breadth and depth of the scope of MES's research as well as showcase the contributions from our colleagues at the Marine Corps' Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, guest contributors from Turkey and Johns Hopkins University, and our guest speakers who presented papers as part of the MES lecture series.

We will continue to offer our analysis and assessment of current events and regional trends as well as the cultural and historical complexity of this strategically important region, all the while being mindful of our primary task to serve as a tool in the advancement of the MCU students and community and sister Professional Military Education institutions.

I look forward to your continued engagement with and support of our work.

Amin Tarzi
Director, Middle East Studies
Marine Corps University

MES Insights: Iran

MES Insights • Volume 7, Issue 1 • January 2016

Rouhani's Long-Term Game-Plan

by Alex Vatanka

On 16 January 2016, after over two years of intense negotiations, Iran was finally able to secure a clean bill of health from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The agency reported that Iran had fulfilled its obligations as part of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) reached on 14 July 2015, and that its nuclear program had been massively scaled back. Within hours, the nuclear-related sanctions imposed on the country, the most comprehensive in human history, were lifted. The flow of foreign investors—mostly Europeans and East Asians—and an increase in foreign trade is already part of the new post-JCPOA Iran.

The order of Rouhani's goals

This groundbreaking moment is politically pivotal for the moderate government of President Hasan Rouhani, who was elected in 2013 on an explicit promise to find a diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear standoff with world powers and with the aim to unshackle the ailing Iranian economy from the deep problems caused by international sanctions. First objective was to reach a nuclear deal. Second objective was to unburden Iran of the sanctions. But the ultimate aim of the Rouhani government has always been to exploit the political capital from the JCPOA to build momentum for a broader and bolder political agenda that not only enables for reform in Iranian foreign policy, but one that empowers him to push ahead with political reform at home in the face of strong opposition from his hardline critics. Domestic political reform, however, is extremely sensitive in the present Iranian power setup, and making inroads on this front will be much harder for Rouhani than was the case with reaching a nuclear agreement.

This reality rests on the fact that on the issue of the JCPOA, despite much angry noise coming from hardline circles, there was a consensus in Iran that major concessions had to be made for the sanctions to be lifted. This consensus was critical. But there is not consensus today in Iran about the direction of Iranian domestic politics. In fact, there is instead an ongoing and highly spiteful zero-sum game for power between the Rouhani faction and the Office of the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC). This fight for political power will intensify in weeks and months to come. First, Iran will in February hold elections for not only its parliament, but also the Assembly of Experts. The Guardian Council, the unelected body that has to approve candidates running for office in Iran and answers only to Khamenei, a day after the IAEA's historic verdict was out announced the disqualification of reformist candidates and Rouhani allies en masse.

The message is clear: Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had no option but to accept a nuclear deal, but he has all the intentions to make sure the moderate Iranian president does not become empowered by JCPOA. While the parliamentary elections are relatively insignificant—as in Iran the parliament does not decide on key strategic policies—the mass disqualification of

moderate clerical candidates for the Assembly of Experts is significant. This is the body that will choose Khamenei's successor, and the incumbent, and his hardline allies in the IRGC and elsewhere, are working hard to make sure someone with their ideological disposition replaces Khamenei once he passes away. Khamenei is 76 years old and the term duration of the next Assembly of Experts will last until 2024, making it highly likely that the next 86 clergymen to be elected to this body will be the ones to choose the next supreme leader.

In that sense, Iran's ability to stick to the JCPOA during its 15-year life span will depend on whether the Rouhani-Khamenei consensus, and the IRGC's tacit endorsement, will last. On the one hand, there is the Rouhani government, packed with Western-educated technocrats with unmistakable reformist political sympathies. They want to bring Iran closer to the West, and if possible, the United States. The former is acceptable to all major Iranian political stakeholders, and is already happening. Witness the visit of numerous leading EU ministers from Germany, France, the UK, Italy and others since the JCPOA was signed, and there was not much pushback from Ayatollah Khamenei's circles.

The US question, however, is far more sensitive. It requires ample caution and skill before the Rouhani team can approach Ayatollah Khamenei and make the case of deeper détente with the United States. The leader is clearly not sold on the idea just yet, and his public reservations are a testimony to that stance. However, Khamenei has repeatedly said that "Now, this [nuclear negotiations] is a new experience. If the other side [the United States] sets aside its bad behavior, this will become a new experience for us, one that will tell us that, well, we can also negotiate with them about other issues. But, if they repeat the same behavior and take the wrong path, it [the negotiations] will only reinforce our past experience."¹

In such a scenario, it is a no brainer that additional cooperation and compromise with Washington most definitely needs to focus on common interests in the Middle East, and particularly the critical fight against the Islamic State. Further cooperation with the US is therefore not impossible, and Rouhani and his team, most notably Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, look to have kept Khamenei's interest on this front. Still, a clear sign of how troubled such a path will be came with Khamenei's strong warning against American "traps" following the decision by the U.S. on 17 January to introduce new sanctions against Iran due to its ballistic missile program.

But domestic politics and factional rivalry outweighs even the dangers of how to handle the American question. In his first two years in office, Rouhani barely lifted a finger for the reformist opposition, but he should be forgiven for adopting a strategy of choosing his political battles carefully and keeping Ayatollah Khamenei on his side to the greatest extent possible. So far this strategy has produced for Rouhani. But he will have to tread very carefully on how he attempts to spend the political capital he has harvested from the JCPOA. The same players that have so far acquiesced to Rouhani's agenda of change, can quickly turn on him should he venture to take a stab at transformation at home.

Going forward

Despite his many and often repeated warnings against foreign political infiltration through the "backdoor"—a reference to foreign investment in the Iranian economy—Khamenei is showing little sign that he wants to stop the Rouhani administration's grand agenda to open Iran up for the global investor community. While the leader clearly has reservations about what a more globally integrated economy means for maintaining tight political control at home, he has evidently little choice.

The economy is ailing and job creation and maintaining socio-economic stability are clearly linked to the extent to which Iran can attract foreign capital and know-how to kick-start its economic

engine, particularly its oil and gas industries. If Iran cannot do that, then its regional rivals, particularly the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf such as Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, will be the beneficiaries. This is not something that even Iran's most ardent hawks would like to see come about.

On one hand, it is still early to judge how President Rouhani opts to utilize the political gains from the JCPOA on the home front. His initial timid reaction to the mass disqualification of moderate candidates suggests that he is likely to continue to pick his fights with Khamenei very carefully. In that sense, Rouhani is different from his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who repeatedly and openly challenged the Khamenei faction on domestic policy.

Rouhani, on the other hand, appears to believe that time and history is on his side, and that he can afford to let his hardline rivals undercut him on the margins—such as keeping his allies out of the upcoming elections—but that he needs time to build momentum for his all-important re-election campaign in 2017. If he acts boldly—by, for example, openly challenging the Guardian Council's mass disqualification of candidates as some of the president's allies are pressing for—he can easily lose that battle to Khamenei, and find himself to be a lame duck president for the remainder of his term. That is what happened to Ahmadinejad in his last two years in office and prior to that to reformist President Muhammad Khatami before he left office in 2005. Furthermore, in that scenario, Rouhani can be sure that Khamenei—who still controls most of the state machinery outside of the Presidential Palace—will do everything to keep him from winning re-election, including facilitating mass fraud to keep Rouhani out.

This basic equation explains Rouhani's predicament as he weighs his domestic political options. This caution by Rouhani is also evident in his posture toward the IRGC generals. While the IRGC media and top commanders continue to question many of the Rouhani cabinet's policies, Rouhani has been relentless in seeking to incorporate IRGC interests in the post-JCPOA economic and political life of Iran whenever possible. This is what he refers to as a "win-win" formula, even though he still has plenty of cajoling and convincing to do.

As Rouhani moves forward, it is important to remember the man has never once referred to himself as a "reformist." He likes to see himself as a capable and experienced bureaucrat that can get things done within the regime parameters in Tehran. In his mind, political change needs to focus on practical returns that will resonate with the greatest segment of Iranian society. Political change for moral and idealistic reasons, as was pursued by Khatami (1997-2005), is not Rouhani's forte.

Hence, his priority was to find a solution to the 12-year nuclear stalemate and his plan to grow the Iran's economy by 5-8% in the next Iranian year (March 2016-March 2017). That would be right in time, as Iran prepares for the next presidential election for summer 2017. And whatever Rouhani does in terms of political reform at home, it is invariably going to be presented not as an ideological alternative to the status quo, but as a way to avert looming security challenges that would undermine moderate or hardliners in the Islamic Republic alike.

Alex Vatanka is a Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute and the Jamestown Foundation in Washington D.C. His book Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence was published in 2015.

Notes:

¹ See Akbar Ganji, "How America Can Win Iran's Trust," *The National Interest*, April 24, 2015, at <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-america-can-win-irans-trust-12713>; and http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f35_ganji_nuke_talks_khamenei/26975513.html.

JCPOA and Future of US-Iran Relations*

by Amin Tarzi

During his initial presidential campaign in 2007-08, Barack Obama repeatedly declared his intention to improve US-Iran relations, and he followed that path after taking office. However, President Obama took a different approach than his predecessors. Previous US-Iran engagements maintained the US-stated intention of changing the nature of the Islamic regime in Iran and seeking global improvement on a host of issues while keeping the threat of military force ever-present. After the experiences in Afghanistan and especially in Iraq, President Obama was moving the United States away from a policy of forcing unsavory regimes through military power to fall in line with Washington's policies or desires. As such, President Obama sought to assure not only the Iranian people but also its leadership that Washington's intention was not to alter the nature of the Islamic Republic, but rather to engage the leadership in Tehran through dialogue and multilateralism. He narrowed the topic, as well, to that of encouraging behavior change on the very specific issue of nuclear fuel enrichment. The US president's policy approach to Iran's nuclear question may be the best applied example of what is becoming known as the Obama Doctrine.

Despite President Obama's demarches of goodwill, the regime in Iran in the early years of Obama's presidency was not receptive to any serious dialogue with the United States, no matter who was at the helm in Washington. The exceedingly confrontational international posture adopted by Tehran during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad along with increasing human rights abuses inside Iran, however, allowed the United States to gather a hitherto unseen multilateral coalition to bring political and economic pressure on Iran.

In Iran's presidential elections of June 2013, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, learning from his ill-fated open support of Ahmadinejad, did not meddle in the process, endorsing candidates whose ideas most closely aligned with his own or undermining the electoral process. This opened the door for longtime regime insider, Hasan Rouhani, to gain the presidency. With Khamenei's cautious blessing, President Rouhani's political platform broke with the past and sought to engage the West with moderation to break the coordinated international sanctions, improve his country's economy, and, ultimately, improve the survivability of the regime.

US-Iran Relations After the Nuclear Deal

For the United States, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear deal is formally known, has showcased the effectiveness of the core of President Obama's foreign policy, namely that through multilateralism and diplomacy, sticky international problems can be resolved and without military intervention. In this case, the JCPOA resulted in diminished Iranian ability to enrich nuclear fuel for military purposes, and the United States averted another military entanglement in the Middle East. The JCPOA has limited the ability of Tehran for 15 years to enrich uranium beyond 3.67 percent or to produce weapons-grade plutonium. As such, Iran's breakout timeline has been extended from roughly 3 months to at least a year, should Tehran decide to renege on its obligations under the JCPOA. Thus, the United States, working through an international partnership, has most likely averted the possibility of a military engagement with Iran over this issue. A victory, yes.

A bit problematic, however, is that the deal only slowed, not removed, the capability, and it does

not cover Iran's quest to enhance its technological expertise to produce more accurate and longer-range delivery systems for potential nuclear weapons in the future or to design warheads capable of accommodating nuclear devices. In October 2016, Iran tested a newer version of its Shehab-3 intermediate-range ballistic missile named Emad. If Emad, in fact, is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead as suggested by observers, it would constitute a violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2231. In March 2016, Iran tested two versions of Qadr ballistic missiles and claimed a successful strike on a target 1,400 kilometers away. Additionally, at least one Iranian media outlet reported that one of the missiles carried a message about Israel's destruction in Hebrew, raising fears about the resumption of Iran's confrontational posture.¹

Furthermore, the JCPOA has not led to improved relations with the United States. Khamenei, fearing what he terms the soft power of the United States designed to undermine the nature of the Islamic regime, has banned any contacts with the US on any matter not related to the JCPOA and has ordered against making commercial deals with US firms. In regional issues ranging from Syria to Saudi Arabia and dealing with ISIL, Tehran has adopted a more nonconformist posture.

The script has not been written for what lies ahead in terms of US-Iranian relations. Iran will be expected to abide by the JCPOA, yes. Beyond that, the future depends on several factors, including but not limited to Iran's internal political wrangling, the health of Khamenei and his eventual successor, Tehran's choice of roles play in the Syria conflict and in the fight against the ISIL, and the upcoming US presidential elections.

Notes:

* An earlier version of this piece has been published in Turkish as "İran'ın Nükleer Anlaşması ve Obama Doktrini" *Analist*, (Ankara, USAK, March 2016).

¹ *Fars News Agency*, "Shelik-e 2 favand mushak 'Qadr H' ba samt-e ahdaf-e 1400 kilometri dar savahel-e Makran+tasavir" 19/12/1394 (9 March 2016), <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13941219000106> (accessed 25 March 2016).

MES Insights: MENA Democratization

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Was the Egyptian Coup “Exceptional”?

by Shadi Hamid

This article will consider a “puzzle”: How could those who claimed to support and believe in democracy turn against it so quickly? I was in Tahrir Square on 11 February 2011, the day that Hosni Mubarak, Egypt’s strongman of 30 years, fell, as hundreds of thousands of Egyptians gathered in protest. It was, for me, one of those once-in-a-lifetime moments. More importantly, it suggested that what we assumed about “authoritarian durability” in the Middle East might have been overstated.

If I had to pick one day that marked the definitive end of the Arab Spring, it would be 14 August 2013, the day of the Rabaa massacre, what Human Rights Watch called “the worst mass killing in modern [Egyptian] history.” Tens of thousands of supporters of the President Muhammad Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood had assembled in the middle of Cairo, protesting the military coup of 3 July 2013 and insisting they would not leave the sit-in until Mursi was reinstated.

For its part, the military was threatening to move in with brute force. It was only a question of when exactly it would happen and just how bad it would be. The fact that it did happen and that the numbers killed and injured far exceeded expectations raised a set of fascinating—and frightening—questions about the fragility of democratic transitions and the quick erosions of norms against the use of violence. And then there was that age-old question: how do otherwise good people come to support terrible things?

Egypt is what we might call a “hard case,” in the sense that it would appear, unlike say Iraq or Syria, to be less susceptible to the kind of violence and internecine conflict mentioned above. Egypt, one of the least artificial Arab states, has had a relatively well-formed sense of state-ness or “Egyptian-ness.” The idea of the Egyptian state, with its attendant bureaucratic largesse, predated Egyptian independence. Religiously, Egypt was more homogenous than many of its neighbors with Sunni Muslims forming around 90 percent of the population.

Yet despite these advantages—and despite quite recent memories of cross-ideological cooperation during the 2011 uprising—fledgling and fragile democratic norms (and more established norms around peaceful participation) rapidly eroded in less than two and a half years.

Democracy is always nice in theory, particular in the pre-2011 era when surveys didn’t necessarily dig—or need to dig—into what people *really* meant by democracy. It seemed that Arabs, like everyone else and perhaps more than anyone else, believed or said they believed that “democracy” was the best available form of government. Democracy, as a word, had become a

convenient stand-in for anything that was good. It was nice in theory, and if a polling outfit had conducted a poll in mid-2013—on the eve of democratic breakdown—you probably would have still had a large enough group saying that they still supported democracy. But democracy in theory and democracy in practice are very different things, particularly if you're an Egyptian liberal who has to live with the consequences of elections, elections in which Islamist parties were the most likely to do well. Even if Islamists didn't do as well as expected, democracy would require that elected leaders, Islamist or otherwise, be responsive to popular sentiment, and, in a religiously conservative country, that sentiment suggested more, not less, religion in politics. This is what we might call "Islamism without Islamists," a phenomenon which I discuss in my new book *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World*.²

Here, again, we return to the issue of norms. When someone we really don't like wins an election here in the United States, we may get angry, we may get sad (and threaten to leave for Canada), but we learn to live with it because we believe, as Americans, that our system—and our institutions—are strong enough to withstand any ensuing polarizations or threats to the foundations of the American state. The question in much of the Middle East is: what if you're not willing to live with it because state institutions aren't resilient and you're worried that the party you hate—the party that threatens not just the policies you believe in but the way you live, how you dress, or what you drink—may alter the very nature of the state, and irrevocably so?

The Egyptian coup was in some ways exceptional, if we compare it to other notable examples of extreme ideological polarization and military intervention into politics—such as the overthrow in Chile of the democratically elected Salvador Allende in 1973. In Chile, those who called themselves "liberals" were divided. Some supported the coup, but some didn't. (Even those who initially supported it, like the Christian Democrats, came to regret their decision and joined the opposition to General Augusto Pinochet's rule).

What is interesting about Egypt, in contrast, is that there was no such division. Almost every single prominent liberal figure—with perhaps two or three exceptions—backed the military coup and the vast majority supported the ensuing massacre, some of them cheering it on rather enthusiastically. This suggests a higher, more inelastic degree of polarization than what we saw in Chile with almost no one in between: It's not so much that the center couldn't hold. It's that there was no center in the first place.

In Latin American contexts, countries were polarized and there was considerable violence (including during Argentina's "dirty war"), but ultimately the primary cleavage in these societies was largely economic in nature. There were socialists who believed in certain things about the organization of the economy and then there were far-right neo-liberals, who were more than willing to subvert democratic processes to block the Left from power. They hated each other, but the divides were, in large part, "tangible." "On matters of economic policy and social expenditures you can always split the difference," the political scientist Dankwart Rustow once wrote, decades before the Arab revolutions.³ How do you split the middle on religion and identity? It's not something you can touch, feel, or measure. It's almost metaphysical, which is why efforts to get Islamists and secularists to actually resolve their differences in Egypt weren't just challenging; they were almost beside the point.

It is tempting to see this struggle, one which seems inseparable from the events which started in 2011, as something "new." At the center of the chasm between Islamists, on one hand, and liberals and secularists, on the other, is a raw, existential divide over the most basic of things, namely the meaning, nature, and purpose of the nation state. One of the most challenging of these foundational questions revolves around the role of religion in public life and the problem of religion and state more broadly. For example, should the state be ideologically and religiously neutral or should it be entrusted promoting a particular conception of the Good? In a sense, what we are seeing today in the post-Arab Spring era of seemingly endless conflict is only the latest iteration of an ongoing struggle to establish legitimate political order in the region, a struggle

which has remained unresolved since the formal abolition of the last caliphate, the Ottoman caliphate, in 1924. This, in other words, is not “new,” but what is new is that democratic openings have brought these tensions, conflicts, and divides to the fore in a way they hadn’t been before.

Shadi Hamid is a senior fellow at the Project on US Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution and the author of Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World..

Notes:

¹ Human Rights Watch, “UN Human Rights Council: Adoption of the UPR Report on Egypt,” March 20, 2015, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/03/20/un-human-rights-council-adoption-upr-report-egypt>; See also Human Rights Watch, “Egypt: Security Forces Used Excessive Lethal Force,” August 19, 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/19/egypt-security-forces-used-excessive-lethal-force>.

² See Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016).

³ Dankwart A. Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model,” *Comparative Politics* 2 (April 1970): 359.

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Democracy, Autocracy, and US Policy in the Arab World: The Return of Realism?

by Daniel Brumberg

Overview: It’s Not About Obama

Whether measured in terms of high diplomacy or official funding levels, it is clear that US support for promoting democratic change in the Arab world has fallen on hard times.¹ Indeed, the struggle against “violent extremism” and the enduring threat posed by *Daesh* (ISIL) and its regional affiliates is now the central concern of US highest foreign policy makers from the president on down. I doubt that this focus on security will change regardless of who occupies the Oval Office starting in late January 2017. In reaching this judgment, I do not subscribe to the thesis that the current and recent US Middle East policies can be traced to Barack Obama’s supposed ideological proclivities, world-view or family history. The thesis is surely seductive, particularly given Obama’s clear resolve to tightly control that policy. But long blog pieces such as Jeffrey Goldberg’s “The Obama Doctrine” *do not prove* the existence of such a doctrine much less its influence.² A fascinating example of *reportage* that draws on—but does not include transcripts of—the one-on-one discussions the author had with the president, Goldberg’s article conflates his voice with that of Obama. This conflation in turn helps the author avoid considering other possible explanations of this “doctrine” and its purported influence on the President’s foreign policy making-decision process. In fact, the record strongly suggests that this process grew out of an improvised, crisis-driven approach sparked by the 2011 Arab political revolts. Sitting on the proverbial couch after eight years of struggling with the region, Obama’s efforts to explain, justify and rationalize these decisions *post facto* is unsurprising. However, rationalization and doctrine are related but different

things. The rationalization of decisions pivots around an evolving response to emerging and often unexpected challenges—even as it draws from political instincts and ideological preferences, both of which were relevant but not determinative of Obama’s actions and non-actions. The latter were driven by cost-benefit analyses born from a set of interlocking constraints rooted on the fused or “pillared” nature of state power and identity politics in the Arab world—and in the troubling, if often unintended, consequences that came with wrestling with this complex legacy. This paper summarizes three related versions of these constraints, highlights their impact on the Obama’s approach to political change in the Arab world, and concludes with some thoughts as to how the next president and their administration will contend with the enduring challenges of political change.

Constraint Number 1: *Shamshun* and the Pillared State

Drawing in part on the work of Arend Lijphart, the first of these constraints might be called the “pillared state.”³ The term connotes the way in which the key strands of state power were fused into one great self-supporting pillar, thus making it likely—*especially from the vantage point of those elites who wield power*—that any effort to unwind one more or these strands would rapidly untie all the others. This kind of great unraveling invites the one threat that no ruling elite tolerates: state collapse. In the Arab world—as in Iran—the very survival of ruling elites has long depended, to one extent or the other, on owning or controlling the economic, political and security levers or strands of state power.

One reason that such assurances were difficult to come by, and equally difficult to imagine, was the very tight fit between ruling elites, security sectors, and state institutions. This *ménage à trois* made its very hard for rulers to imagine surviving any divorce. But it was precisely this kind of divorce that was required if any measure of serious political change of a democratizing nature was to take place. As any student of democratization knows, ruling leaders and those groups who they protect—or purport to protect—will not countenance change unless they have some reasonable or “credible” assurances that the pillar of state rule can be partly *unwound* without collapsing on top of them.⁴ In this sense, the memory of the legend of Samson (*Shamshun* in Arabic) endures: Business elites need to know or believe that abandoning political power will not bring bankruptcy on their heads. Security elites must believe that if they forfeit the role of regime protector and become a professional security apparatus they will continue to enjoy the economic and corporate benefits that had been previously guaranteed by their fusion with the state. And all leaders must know or believe that they will *physically survive* if and when the great unwinding begins. The irony, of course, is that the longer the pillared state endured, the more difficult it became to imagine any alternative to it.

Constraint Number 2: Pillared Identities and the Protection Racket System

Drawing on Lijphart once again while also invoking themes from the *God Father* trilogy and the work of the late Charles Tilly, the second related constraint on democratic change in the Arab World—and far beyond—is rooted in the “protection racket” role that states, political systems, and ruling elites play in defending specific identity groups, which maybe based on religion, sect, ethnicity or even ideology.⁵ As I have argued for more than two decades, one reason that Middle East autocracies have endured is that they protected groups that feared their political and economic interests—and even their physical survival—could be threatened if one or more larger groups invoked electoral victories to reduce or abolish the political and economic rights of smaller group.⁶ The Sunni monarchy in Bahrain; the Alawite, Neo-Bathist rulers in Syria; the Sunni Neo-Bathists in Saddam Husayn’s Iraq; and the quasi-secular regimes in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt are all examples of autocracies that protected key identity groups in return for their loyalty—or least

acquiescence—to the pillared state. As a result, both ruling elites and the groups for which they spoke came to view the survival of this protection racket as essential for their own political and even physical survival. Even modest political openings were often seen—especially by minority regimes and their allies—as an *existential threat*.

Of course, as any Mafioso knows, a well-functioning protection racket depends in part on the capacity of the protector to generate the very threat needed to justify both the provision of protection and the costs extracted for this service. Just as any store-owner in Brooklyn or North Side Chicago knows that their businesses could mysteriously burn down over night unless they pay for protection, minority Shi'ites in Kuwait, Berbers in Morocco, Copts in Egypt, and secular intellectuals in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Kuwait, and even Saudi Arabia must always consider the costs of rejecting their protectors. Thus it should come as no surprise that in the Syria of Bashar al-Assad and his father Hafiz (the “Protector of the Lion,” in English), there were plenty of Alawites who despised the regime but feared they had no alternative but to tolerate if not support it. Protection rackets and the loyalty (or thin tolerance) that they attempt to extract *are always to some extent tacit and thus potentially brittle systems*.

It is for this reason that Arab leaders never conceived of the protection racket game as static. Unable to guarantee the ultimate loyalty of clients, Arab leaders shook up the chess board by shifting support to other groups or taking policy actions that pitted one group against the other. Thus in Jordan the late King Husayn—and even more his son Abdullah—began shifting away from the East Bank Bedouin tribes towards elements within the Palestinian business community; Hafiz al-Assad looked to bribe Sunni businessmen in Aleppo with offers of “selective reform” (to use Steven Heydemann’s term); the amirs of Kuwait secured their rule by first channeling oil-rent benefits to the urban Sunni business classes and the Shi’ite minority. They later sought to contain this modernizing sector by giving citizenship to thousands of Bedouin tribes from Saudi Arabia—groups whose leaders eventually rewarded the amirs by having the temerity to call for greater political representation. Shifting ground, that amir responded by favoring Shi’ites and liberals, while tolerating (and some argue rewarding) Sunni fundamentalist leaders—all in a bid to keep liberals and Shi’ites in line.

These identity games demonstrated the extent to which the pillaring of state power was ultimately tied to the pillaring of ethnic, religious, sectarian or ideological (secular versus Islamist) groups in Arab societies. To one extent or another, “neo-confessionalism” sub-cultures have long defined the politics not merely of Lebanon, but of all Arab states.⁷ Autocracy pivoted around a protection racket by which Arab leaders funneled protection and patronage to different identity groups in return for their loyalty, or at least their acquiescence, to ruling regimes. Thus, as William Zartman noted long ago, the lines between state and society, between rulers and opposition, were blurred.⁸ A system of manipulated and institutionalized fear stifled the formation of shared national identities, impaired or corrupted representative institutions such as parliaments, and ultimately worked against the broad opposition alliances and process of regime-opposition “pact making” that have proven so crucial to the democratization processes in the wider global arena. Thus, the bitter legacy of identity politics, undermined every Arab political rebellion in 2011-12, with the exception of Tunisia.

Constraint Number 3: Liberalized and Full Protection Racket Autocracies

The “Tunisian exception” reminds us that if the legacy of protection racket identity politics was disastrous it was not of one piece. In the Arab world’s what I have called “liberalized autocracies” played the protection racket game by creating a political field that was sufficiently pluralist, such that rival identity groups could compete for the state’s protection and patronage, but sufficiently controlled and manipulated, such that oppositions were unlikely to risk joining forces against the

state—much less forging a common opposition agenda.⁹ Liberalized autocracy was a “second best” choice not merely for regimes but also for opposition leaders, many of which viewed state controlled competition as preferable to the unknowns of full democratic change and the brutality of full autocracy. By contrast, full autocracies severely limited the space for political expression, often allowing only one identity group some chance to engage in sham elections that were totally controlled by the ruling party. In Tunisia, former President Zayn al-Abidin bin Ali shut out the Islamists, offering the urban secular professional and business sector protection in return for their support or acquiescence. The Sunni monarchs of Bahrain shut out the Shi’ites, and on this basis secured the support of the minority Sunnis, just as Hafiz al-Assad crushed Islamists and ultimately depended on the Alawite (and Christian) communities for his survival.

Liberalized and full autocracies generated very different legacies that in turn helped to shape the multiple trajectories of the 2011 Arab rebellions. By reducing politics and parliamentary life to a process of peaceful coexistence between identity groups, liberalized autocracy was a “trap,” as I called it, one that did not impart the alliance-building skills and ethos of compromise essential to democratic governance. Especially where strong executives were backed by robust security sectors—as was the case in Egypt—the incentive and capacity for building democratic alliances was limited. This legacy helped the generals manipulate the opposition and reassert control after they toppled President Muhammad Mursi in July 2013. Similarly, in Kuwait Islamists, Sunni liberals, Shi’ites, and tribal leaders long ago learned how to lobby for the benefits of oil rents, thus looking to the ruling al-Sabah family—or different actors within it—for the ultimate salvation. The capacity of monarchs to stay “above the political fray”—or at least appear to be doing so—together with substantial oil revenues helped the leaders of Kuwait, Qatar, Morocco, and Jordan deflect the storm of political revolt.

As for full autocracy, its impact has depended in part on the nature of identity cleavages. In societies exhibiting deep *sectarian* divisions, such as Iraq, Syria, and Bahrain, regime leaders who had manipulated these divisions to survive deemed reform as tantamount to political and physical suicide. This policy created a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it gave deeply estranged oppositions ample cause to topple regimes rather than to negotiate—and provided regimes ample cause to wipe out their opponents—as the cases of Libya, Bahrain and Syria sadly demonstrated. By contrast, in Tunisia there was an *ideological* rather than religious or sectarian divide within the urban middle class, and what is more, no strong or politicized military to serve as ultimate arbiter. As result, while Islamists and secularists espoused very different political programs, they had two basic choices: talk or fight. The fact that talking between Islamists and secularists, capitalists and socialists, liberals and Arab nationalists, began in 2005—*6 years before* the 2010-11 “Jasmine Revolution”—is instructive. The added benefit the *Conférence Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (or CGTT) was also crucial. A mass trade union with impeccable nationalist credentials, the CGTT was well positioned to lead the “National Dialogue” in 2012 and 2013. The conclusion of that dialogue also owes much to the positive pressure brought by regional and global actors (the US, Algeria, and the EU), and to a difficult learning process within the Tunisian political elite. Looking to their west and seeing state collapse in Libya, and off to the east in Egypt—where a military coup in August-September 2013 produced unprecedented state violence—Tunisian leaders concluded that they could not afford to fail in their quest for a new political bargain.

Obama: From Dreams of Engagement to “Not Doing Stupid Things”

By emphasizing identity conflicts, I do not mean to minimize economic factors or socio-economic conflict. Regimes throughout the Arab world used state access to domestic economic resources, as well as revenues from oil sales and strategic rents from regional and global powers, to finance what I long ago called the “ruling bargain.” But as the late Clifford Geertz once noted, the elite instrumentalization of identity conflicts injects into otherwise rational struggles over economic

power and state resources an existential anxiety that becomes part of the system of politics, especially when and if a real prospect of political change emerges.¹⁰ As a result, if and when pressures from within or without pushed Arab leaders to reform—or even more so—to abandon office, the most likely outcome would be regime efforts to revive protection racket politics combined with the fragmentation of opposition groups, as some turned back to the state for protection and others defied intractable rulers. The “strong” Arab state was always a ticking time bomb.

Two US presidents have struggled in a direct and ultimately perilous way with this time bomb: George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The first was hardly aware of this bomb, and/or assumed that once Saddam Husayn’s despotic regime fell, a new democratic order would sprout from the soil of Iraqi society. When this did not happen, the Bush administration backed and then helped to institutionalize a confessional power sharing system that gave the Shi’ite population and leaders disproportionate power, and thus the chance to seek electoral, political and economic revenge on their Sunni compatriots.¹¹ While much ink has been spilled on the various “mistakes” that the Bush administration committed, *the key lesson of the Iraqi misadventure is that the US was—and remains—ill-prepared to play matchmaker or counselor in divided societies.* The problem is not merely the amount of military and other resources required to construct nations on the rubble of failed or toppled sectarian or neo-confessional systems: *the deeper challenge is to do so without being viewed by local players as merely an ally of one or more of the key conflicting groups.*

There is little doubt that Obama viewed the US effort to force political change and then serve as marriage broker as fool-hearty. This perception surely played some role in his decision to put distance between his administration and the neo-conservative ideas and actors that had inspired Bush’s Iraq venture and his subsequent “Freedom Agenda.” Thus, during the first three years of the Obama administration, he advanced a hybrid, dissonant foreign policy that mixed realism and global engagement with continued—if more low key—US democracy promotion policies. This policy sought to make liberalized autocracies more open and tolerant but in ways that would sustain their ruling establishments, all of which were friendly with Washington. But the 2011 Arab political revolts confronted Obama with a new reality for which his administration was totally unprepared. In the case of Tunisia, Egypt, and then Libya, these revolts accomplished the very regime change that US policy was still designed to avoid.

I had the chance to see the administration grapple with these unprecedented events during two White House meetings with US Middle East experts. Anecdotal evidence has its limitations, but from where I sat—and from other reports—this experience seemed to amply demonstrate that the administration’s response was a product of constant improvisation together with the inevitable bureaucratic and personal policy rivalries that went hand-in-hand with such an evolving dynamic. The administration could not get a handle on events that were moving so fast, or a clear sense of the outcome—often unintended—of its actions. In Libya, US support for the first UN Security Council Resolution in history to implicitly invoke the language R2P (Responsibility to Protect), set the stage for a “lead from behind” NATO bombing campaign that toppled what was left of Muammar Qadhafi’s regime, thus leading to the implosion of what had always been a tribally and geographically fragmented state. Well before the full destructive implications of this dynamic would fully reveal themselves in Libya, Yemen fell into internal conflict as did Syria. Syria’s tragic descent into civil was sparked in large measure by Assad’s belief that any compromise with the Sunni majority would invite regime (Alawite) destruction and/or civil war. As both of these outcomes were unacceptable, Assad reasoned that his only available option was to smash the opposition.¹²

Obama not only failed to grasp this existential logic, he inadvertently magnified its violent logos by openly declaring that the Assad regime was on its last legs.¹³ While it is likely that Assad would have pursued his bloody path even in the absence of such provocative and premature observations from a US president, it seems to me that Obama’s remarks reinforced Assad’s determination not

to endure the same gutting that Qadhafi had suffered in his last agonizing hours and minutes. Indeed, if there is any one lesson that Arab leaders took from the Arab revolts of 2011 and beyond, it was that while their states were suffering from serious legitimacy crises, any effort to fix what was not completely broken would produce state collapse. This was certainly the view of Egypt's generals, who in the Summer of 2013 (and perhaps much earlier) concluded that newly elected President Muhammad Mursi and his allies in the Muslim Brotherhood were undertaking policies that were shaking the very foundations of one of the region's most longstanding states—and all the pillars that supported it.¹⁴

Did Obama himself reach a similar conclusion as he watched internal conflicts escalate in Libya, Syria and Yemen, and as he watched Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia intervene in military ventures that did not stem the tide of state collapse but instead escalated it? Perhaps. Obama's retrospective assessment may well have jived with longstanding notions about the centrifuge of "tribal" identities. But they did not amount to a coherent doctrine that shaped his policy decisions. Those decisions were/are a response to rapidly changing events, some of which unfolded very badly, despite Obama's *initial efforts* to respond favorably to the demands of young protestors. Indeed, reading Jeffrey Goldberg and others, there is a strong sense that Obama felt burned not only by the region and its trajectory, but also by his own decisions to facilitate former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's ouster and then to prematurely affirm the end of Assad's reign. Frustrated with a region that refused to bend to the arc of reason as he understood it, by late 2015 Obama had focused his Middle East policy on countering (from the air, and by mid-2016, increasingly from the ground) the most dangerous example of organized religious tribalism: *Daesh*. What was missing in this policy, as Tamara Wittes has noted, was any deeper approach to addressing (much less solving) the basic political and governance challenges in Syria and Iraq that fed the *Daesh* beast in the first place.¹⁵

Après Obama

But is there an approach that will meet this challenge? Is there a doctrine, a coherent strategy, in short an answer beyond the temptations—and potential disasters—that issue from improvised foreign policy making? I am not sure. Whoever sits next in the Oval Office will have to contend with a region in which neo-confessional identity politics endures in ways that are far from democratic, but in some cases may be preferable to the identity monster represented by *Daesh*. Liberalized autocracy may be a *cul de sac* but it is not a guillotine. Thus, the next president will probably do their best to ensure that the states that survived the Arab political revolts secure a measure of internal cohesion and consensus rather than experiment with major political changes on the one side, or slip into full autocracy on the other. The challenge for Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco is to avoid the temptation of de-liberalization and instead seek real engagement with their societies. But the leaders of such societies must also overcome their own divisions, and on this score, the US—submerged in its own identity politics—is hardly well positioned to help.

What about Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and most of all bloody Syria? Here too we are unlikely to see major shifts in US policy. The slow but perhaps steady increase in US troops in Iraq may constitute something of a "slippery slope" taking Washington into yet another overseas military entanglement—or it may not. But even the wisest and most experienced of presidents, backed by a pool of seasoned experts, will find the task of treating the causes rather than the symptoms of political conflict in the Arab world daunting. Multiple tablespoons of doctrine and strategic planning may not be enough to repair the damage done to those Arab states in which the pillars of rule collapsed or were collapsed.

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Notes:

¹ Stephen McInerney and Cole Bockenfeld, *The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2017: Democracy*,

Governance, and Human Rights in the Middle East, Project on Middle East Democracy, April 2016, <http://pomed.org/pomed-publications/fy17-budget-report/>.

² Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

³ Arend Lijphart, "Consociational Democracy," *World Politics* 21, no. 2 (January 1969): 207-225, <https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/jaro2005/EUP405/lijphart69.pdf>.

⁴ John W. Schiemann, *The Politics of Pact-Making: Hungary's Negotiated Transition to Democracy in Comparative Perspective* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2005), 10-36.

⁵ Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime" in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169-187, http://www.fd.unl.pt/docentes_docs/ma/RBR_MA_11377.pdf.

⁶ See Daniel Brumberg, "Transforming the Arab World's Protection-Racket Politics," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (July 2013): 88-103, <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/transforming-arab-world%E2%80%99s-protection-racket-politics>.

⁷ Dina Shehata was one of the first scholars to illuminate the impact of neo-confessional identity politics on Egypt's politics under Mubarak. See Dina Shehata, *Islamists and Secularists in Egypt: Opposition, Conflict & Cooperation* (Routledge, 2013).

⁸ For an excellent discussion of the enduring relevance of Zartman's work, see: <http://www.eui.eu/documents/rscas/research/mediterranean/ws5mrm2007.pdf>.

⁹ Daniel Brumberg, "Democratization in the Arab World? The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 4 (October 2002): 56-68, <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/democratization-arab-world-trap-liberalized-autocracy>.

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Politics in the New States," in *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, ed. Clifford Geertz (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1963), 105-157,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265030312_The_Integrative_Revolution_Primitive_Sentiments_and_Civil_Politics_in_New_States.

¹¹ Lise Morjé Howard, "The Ethnocracy Trap," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no.4 (October 2012): 155-169.

¹² Three weeks before Obama's was first inaugurated president, I traveled with a USIP-Stimson Center delegation to Syria and met with Assad for nearly two hours. He asserted that "Syria will never be a Lebanon," and that his power and authority were the central guarantees of state cohesion.

¹³ Scott Wilson and Joby Warrick, "Assad must go, Obama says," *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/assad-must-go-obama-says/2011/08/18/gIQAelheOJ_story.html.

¹⁴ See Daniel Brumberg, "The Resurgence of the Egyptian State," *Foreign Policy*, July 8, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/08/the-resurgence-of-the-egyptian-state/>.

¹⁵ Tamara Cofman Wittes, "The slipperiest slope of them all," The Brookings Institution, March 15, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2016/03/15-slippery-slope-middle-east-wittes>.

MES Insights: Terrorism

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Politico-Psychological Analysis of the Recent Terrorist Attacks in Turkey: An Insider's View

by Şebnem Udum

Introduction

Since the 19th century Ottoman era and stretching to the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkish foreign policy has had a Western vocation and a diplomatic tradition influenced by Western values. Due to the psychological impact of World War I and its aftermath, the founders of the Republic contemplated that for the survival of the state, it was essential to be part of the European zone of peace and liberal values and to define a new national identity that was not in conflict with these values. Thus, Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East, where some of the European powers were entangled, was cautious: In the interwar period, it sought alliances and non-aggression pacts. During the Cold War, it chose to stay away from regional conflicts and had defined its bilateral relations according to its economic and energy interests.

The 1990-1991 Gulf War and what followed forced Ankara to change its policy of caution and to adopt a more active policy to prevent an increase in terrorist attacks along its southern borders resulting from the instability in the region. Turkey has been suffering from separatist terrorism since the early 1980s. At that time, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) carried out terrorist attacks that claimed tens of thousands of Turkish military and civilian lives, including Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin. While the conflict generally eased after 1999, when PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan was captured, it resumed after the 2003 Iraq War. The war left a divided Iraq that, after the US withdrawal in 2011, became a fertile ground to raise terrorists and suicide attackers out of a hopeless, young generation. In a broader sense, a disaffected population could be convinced of a narrative of "suffering" and "social discrimination" and easily mobilized to action on the basis of ethnicity or religion, like in Iraq, or elsewhere with a significant migrant population or a minority. The resulting religious extremism gave rise to the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL or its Arabic acronym *Daesh*). The group took war to its barbaric form and demolished anything they deemed "the other" or, more precisely, that did not fit their definition of Islam.

At the same time, Turkey found itself facing the crisis in Syria. The protests against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria starting in 2011 devolved into a civil war that included the use of chemical weapons. Russia was mainly interested in keeping Assad in power to maintain its critical bases in Syria along the Eastern Mediterranean. The United States, on the other hand, was wary of another military intervention in the region, and thus, military intervention in Syria was not even an option for the Obama administration. The mounting atrocities caused a massive flow of refugees into Turkey.

The large influx of people and the continued hostilities created a huge problem for border security in the land and maritime domain as well as significant national security challenges for Turkey. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian arm of the PKK, emerged as a powerful group in the conflict in Syria. To fight ISIL, the “train and equip” program to set up a mainly Sunni Arab Syrian rebel force failed and ended.¹ Hence, the PYD, emerged as a powerful group out of the conflict in Syria. The fight between ISIL and the PYD over strategic lands to consolidate their power spread to Turkish territory with ISIL attacks against Kurds.

This piece will cover terrorist attacks carried out by both the PKK and ISIL in Turkey over a one-year time span (July 2015-July 2016), provide a politico-psychological analysis to assess the impact of these attacks, and present an insider’s view.

Chronology of events:

- 20 July 2015: ISIL attack against the Socialist Youth Associations Federation—a group affiliated with the Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP)—during a public statement on the Qobani siege, killing 34 people in Suruç in southeastern Turkey.
- 10 October 2015: Twin suicide attacks by ISIL against groups including HDP and trade unions in Ankara, killing 95 people.
- 12 January 2016 and 19 March 2016: ISIL attacks in Sultanahmet Square and Taksim Square—popular tourist attractions of Istanbul—killing 16 tourists.
- 17 February 2016: Suicide attack carried out by a group affiliated with the PKK against the Turkish military and civilian personnel of the Turkish Armed Forces, killing 29 people.
- 13 March 2016: Suicide attack carried out by the PKK at the city center (Kızılay) of Ankara, killing 38 people
- 7 June 2016: Suicide attack by the PKK against police forces in Istanbul, killing 12 people.
- 28 July 2016: ISIL attack involving Kalashnikov rifles and a suicide attack at Istanbul’s Atatürk airport, killing 45 people.

The attacks in Kızılay and Atatürk Airport were different from, and more impactful than, the previous ones since they were not directed against a certain profession or group, but rather they directly targeted ordinary citizens or tourists travelling to Turkey. The brutality of the attacks and their locations deserve an analysis to assess the psychological impact.

Analysis

Turkey, having fought against separatist terrorism for three decades, is now witnessing Islamist extremist terrorist attacks in its territory against its citizens, values, and identity. These dual threats are exacerbated by the lack of shared vision between Turkey and its allies regarding Syria and Bashar al-Assad’s future and the role assigned to PYD in the fight. In fact, both sources of threat, ISIL and PYD, are fighting with each other over the control of the corridor lying along Turkey’s southern border. What complicated the picture was the image conveyed by Ankara as a firm standing for the overthrow of Assad, hence a possible support to groups against his regime. Turkish foreign policy towards Syria was shortsighted at best. The regional consequences became unbearable, with the leading to a porous border, paving way the way for ISIL and PKK infiltration.

In 2014, the Turkish government officially launched the “Resolution Process” or the “Peace Process” (as the HDP referred to it) to end the armed conflict with the slogan to “end the tears of mothers,” referring to the funerals that sparked outrage on both sides.² While the goal was clear, that is to end PKK terrorism, the end state and other details were vague for the public and the political parties alike: It was unclear whether the PKK would be disarmed totally and what would be a viable political solution. There were also some mixed messages for the constituencies. While Turks, long suffering from the PKK terrorist attacks, called for the cessation of the attacks in return for granting cultural and civil rights, Kurdish political groups heightened the expectation for eventual autonomy.³ For PKK’s armed branch based in the Qandil Mountain (in Northern Iraq), disarming would mean a total defeat for the PKK and would end the influence of their discourse if they chose unarmed political participation. Nevertheless, the cessation of terrorist attacks and the prospect of a peaceful debate of the issue were received well by the public.

The 7 June 2015 elections in Turkey were a turning point for all the political parties represented in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM—the Turkish Parliament). The HDP received 13 percent of the vote (going over the 10 percent threshold) and won more seats than the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Together, opposition parties had a chance to form a coalition government, but they could not overcome their differences. After the June election, the PKK resumed its attacks in some provinces in southeastern Turkey; however, this time its targets went beyond military units to include civilians in what is referred to as a “*hendek* (trench) war.” In the subsequent elections in November, HDP lost a lot of ground, but still prevailed over the election threshold.

As retaliation for its losses in the trench war, the PKK orchestrated the impactful attack in Ankara. The attacks were carried out literally in the heart of the city, where the residents have felt the most secure. The 17 February 2016 attack targeted a bus carrying military and civilian personnel leaving work during rush hour. The location of the attack was on Merasim Street, in the middle of the headquarters of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces and the residences of Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) personnel. The sound of the explosion could be heard in the Çankaya district, host to the foreign missions and state protocol. This increased the psychological impact by signaling that the terrorists could get close to the most secure neighborhoods of the Turkish capital city.

The Atatürk Boulevard, or the “Protocol Road,” starts from *Çankaya Köşkü* (Çankaya Mansion)—which has been the Presidential Residence until 2014—goes down the hill, touches embassy compounds along each side, runs by the TBMM, and reaches the military headquarters and the office of the Prime Minister. It is one of the main routes of a typical Ankara resident. If the road is followed down to the city center (Kızılay) we reach the main transportation hub, Güvenpark, where the riot police are on duty. The PKK’s March attack hit Güvenpark.

13 March 2016 was an exceptionally sunny day in Ankara with a clear sky, offering a relaxing day out for residents. After a great day with family, I was enjoying the evening. Suddenly, at 18:30 I heard a loud sound that eventually proved to be that of an explosion near Güvenpark. It came as a shock and left the deepest psychological impact not only on Ankara residents, but also on the country as a whole, as the attack targeted the ordinary citizen. The immediate reaction was resentment for not “deserving” such a horrendous attack. Their sense of personal or communal “border” or “buffer” with unsettled countries was violated, and they felt that their lives and lifestyles were threatened like the people on the other side of “this border.”

The reaction has much to do with national self-perception and national identity as a result of World War I. After the war, Turkey strove to become equal to contemporary civilizations, especially Western civilization. Turkish leaders believed that if Turkey had stayed “backward” or like a post-colonial state, it would sooner or later be partitioned by Great Powers—a trauma left by the 1920 Sèvres Treaty that foresaw the partitioning of Anatolia among the victorious powers of World War I and did not recognize an independent state for Turks. The resulting social identity, thus, was as superior to the Middle East, but inferior to the West. Hence, to overcome this inferiority complex, Turkey introduced many changes: a new legal system, abolishment of the caliphate and the

sultanate, and a new alphabet, dress code, and civil law in accordance with Western values. At the core of this social construction lay the ideas of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, whose name was given to the Istanbul airport, an international hub. Thus, the attack by ISIL at Atatürk Airport and the way it was carried out left a deep impact on the Turkish people, just like the attacks in Ankara.

The discourse of religious extremism that could appeal to the devoted religious communities is “social discrimination” or “sense of inferiority” of Muslims in non-Muslim societies. One of the reasons that Turkey has become the scene of ISIL attacks is its ability to overcome this feeling of discrimination with its secular system and European Union prospects. Terrorism targets moderates and moderation and mobilizes disaffected populations through the propaganda of “suffering.”

Conclusion

With the problems in the region continuing, Turkey continues to face challenges inherent to being a recipient state of fleeing refugees. There is already a growing resentment toward Syrian refugees due to differences in culture, gender biases, family values, and reproduction rates. If the Syrian refugees are granted citizenship, the Turks fear that their wages will go down. Coupled with the Syrian refugee issue and the debate on granting them citizenship are new concerns over a new “minority rights problem” with demands on territory, particularly, Hatay. The Southeastern part of Turkey hosts oil and shale gas fields, as well as two pipelines that end in terminals within and close to Hatay. The region is also rich in water resources and agricultural land suitable for organic farming. Additionally, Turkey and its ally in Washington remain at odds over the PYD. Washington supports the PYD openly and formally, as it is the most important local power fighting ISIL; Ankara sees the PYD as a terrorist organization because of its ties with the PKK. As a result, the fears and threat perceptions of Turkey regarding the Kurdish issue remain unchanged: the division of the country as a spillover effect of an independent Kurdish state in its southern border.

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Notes:

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From Wolf Pack to Lone Wolf: The Retreating Islamic State's Radicalized Strategy to Exist beyond Territoriality

by Joseph Tyler Gruber

Analysis of the self-identified Islamic State's (IS) prolific and complex propaganda machine combined with increasing incidents of homegrown terrorism paint the group as a pervasive national security threat with a global reach. At the same time, reports from the front lines of its self-proclaimed "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria boast sequential defeats and massive territorial losses for IS. These conflicting depictions of IS's capacity are reflective of the jihadist group's broad strategy to reshape its identity. By promoting and producing so-called "lone wolf" terrorist attacks internationally, IS is seeking a new source of legitimacy which can survive the military and territorial losses of the caliphate.

Explosive Origins

The chaos and instability caused by the Syrian civil war was the ladder with which IS climbed to power. Within the omnipresent carnage of conflict, the Salafi jihadist group found legitimacy among disenfranchised Sunni Muslims who were unsympathetic to regime loyalist and other rebel groups. The group distinguished itself from its regional competitors in both its ideological aspirations and its ultraviolent tactics. Early military clashes were characterized by the jihadists' indiscriminate killing of opponents and civilians. The group also found an audience that was ripe for radicalization within the marginalized Sunni population in Iraq. Harnessing this fresh support, IS launched a series of sweeping offensives in Iraq and Syria that filled international headlines in early 2014. The relatively small extremist group captured the major urban centers of Raqqa, Fallujah, and Ramadi with an unforeseen level of ferocity and success. In June of the same year, IS achieved a monumental victory the capture of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul. By the end of the month IS declared the establishment of a caliphate that transcended the internationally recognized borders of Iraq and Syria.

Implications of the Caliphate

In declaring the establishment of the Islamic State, Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi proclaimed himself the caliph and "Commander of the Faithful" of what he believed to be the first ideologically legitimate Islamic caliphate the world has seen in a millennium. This territorial aspect of a caliphate provided a boost in credibility and legitimacy for IS. At the same time, this very territoriality confined IS to new criteria for legitimacy, and opened IS up to more observable measures of success, and failure, to which it had not been subject to prior to its territorial caliphate. With the establishment of the caliphate, IS was now theologically bound to possess "*ardh al-tamkeen*", or "land to rule", and strictly enforce its Salafi ideology throughout this land.¹ Furthermore, IS's identity became tied to the belief that its caliphate was destined to defeat the army of "Rome" (Christianity) in Dabiq, Syria, which would in turn incite the apocalyptic Day of Judgement by God that is foretold in the Quran.² This purpose, coupled with the Salafi/Wahhabi ideology that violence is the justified

mechanism to purify the faith of all “*kufir*”, or “unbelievers”, obligates the caliphate to engage in what Islamic Law refers to as “offensive jihad”, or the constant war against all who do not practice their ultra-conservative brand of Sunni Islam.³

Following the establishment of the caliphate, IS demonstrated its understanding of what constituted, and was necessary to maintain, its legitimacy, as well as the measures required to do so. Securing and expanding the caliphate became IS’s paramount goal, but its commitment to the offensive jihad meant it faced a plethora of domestic enemies, including the governments of Iraq and Syria, Shi’ite and Kurdish fighters, and rival Sunni militants, on a circumambient war-front. The high cost to maintain legitimacy left IS hungry for increased manpower. In response to this demand IS directed a bulk of its burgeoning propaganda machine towards recruitment of a steady influx of foreign fighters to the build an army of the caliphate.

Legitimizing the Caliphate

A robust propaganda apparatus was part of the complex bureaucracies emblematic of the state established by IS. Under the presumed leadership of the caliph’s chief spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, IS’s propaganda network was funded and managed using the same level of diligence given to the military. As a result, IS developed perhaps the most advanced propaganda apparatus ever seen from a terrorist organization. Social media operatives managed the development and distribution of thousands of videos, pictures, audio recordings, and messages on highly trafficked social media sites every month, as well as the publication and distribution of periodical online propaganda magazines; including the English language *Dabiq*, French *Dar al-Islam*, Turkish *Konstantiniyye*, and Russian *Istok*.⁴

The output of IS’s vast propaganda apparatus demonstrated a high level of forethought and guidance, exemplifying the strict control IS leadership had over its content. As such, IS’s propaganda provides a useful tool for understanding the caliphate’s broader strategy. Propaganda output prior to late-2015 focused on recruitment to the caliphate, as IS and the newly established caliphate needed new recruits to fuel its offensive jihad and build an army. This propaganda strategy was uniquely different from that of most other terrorist organizations, particularly that of al-Qaeda. After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, and the subsequent loss of its Afghan safe haven, al-Qaeda’s propaganda prioritized radicalizing unaffiliated individuals, including those often described as lone wolves, to conduct attacks against the far enemy in the West. While IS required the manpower to build a standing military and defeat the enemy at its gates, al-Qaeda’s lack of dependence on territorial legitimacy allowed it the space to focus on the far enemy in the West.

To acquire new recruits to the caliphate, IS employed two seemingly incompatible propaganda styles that attempted to bolster the caliphate’s legitimacy while tailoring its messaging with different rationalities for joining. The first theme exaggerated the stability of the caliphate by portraying IS as a champion of peace and inclusivity for all Sunni Muslims, boasting about the benefits and stability brought by its religiously righteous government, as well as the peaceful coexistence between its multi-ethnic people.⁵ The message repeatedly painted the caliphate as a pathway to prosperity by nostalgically romanticizing the power and prestige of previous Muslim caliphates, a message designed to strongly resonate with Muslims disenfranchised by repressive and secular regimes. In stark contrast, the second style of propaganda depicted IS as a military power, slaughtering unbelievers and expanding its territory with an unprecedented level of success. The latter theme was most notably present throughout IS’s social media efforts, with frontline photographs of IS soldiers standing over deceased enemies, portraying victory and showing potential jihadists that IS had the resources and momentum to achieve victory over the enemies of Islam. With every military victory IS was able to better portray itself as the legitimate caliphate, and as a result its territorial control quickly became its greatest recruitment tool.

The caliphate's demand for fresh recruits was being accomplished with surprising vigor, and by the end of 2015 worldwide recruitment was estimated at upwards of 30,000 foreign fighters.⁶ The capacity to achieve unprecedented military victory provided IS with an observable measure of success for recruitment purposes. As a former CIA analyst summarized "the overriding point is that success breeds success ... the perception of quick victories and territory and weapons and bases means they don't need to try hard to recruit."⁷

This self-serving cycle initially played out in IS's favor, as it expanded to a size of over 35,000 square miles by January 2015.⁸ The group demonstrated an unusual efficacy for survival and expansion even in the face of mounting opposition from intervening states and non-state armed opposition. Yet this symbiotic relationship between its legitimacy (particularly territoriality) and recruitment created a reliance on ambitious military objectives. While the cycle might have appeared self-sufficient, IS's pool of recruits, while substantial, was certainly not boundless, and sectarian as well as intra-sectarian violence further alienated the caliphate within the broader Muslim community. IS also became faced with a more unified international opposition, as additional states realized that IS's offensive jihad would not stop with Iraq and Syria. The military involvement of Turkey and Russia, among others, illustrates the growing opposition to IS. By March 2016, for example, the US-led coalition alone had conducted 10,809 airstrikes on IS targets, killing an estimated 20,000 fighters.⁹ This increase in internal and foreign opposition left IS confronting enemies on multiple fronts, and IS territorial legitimacy was increasingly under pressure with each loss it incurred.

A Turning Tide

By mid-2017 the caliphate, which once boasted 35,000 square miles, had been reduced to only 14,000 square miles.¹⁰ From early 2015 through early 2016, IS lost 40 percent of its territory in Iraq, including the cities of Ramadi and Tikrit, the Sinjar region, and the Baiji oil refineries. Through the same period IS lost over 10 percent of its territory in Syria.¹¹ These substantial defeats shattered the image of IS as an unstoppable force, which IS had become dependent upon for recruitment, and undercut its territorial legitimacy. By early 2016, the flow of foreign fighters to the caliphate had largely stopped, leaving IS with a dwindling force that continued to endure massive battlefield casualties. In the same way that IS's military victories had bred success off success, military failures now breed failure and loss of legitimacy, resulting in a decline in recruitment, making it all the more difficult to hold territory, let alone achieve military victory and territorial gains. What was once their greatest recruitment tool now stood as an indication of their failures, leaving IS to address the fact that they are increasingly becoming a caliphate with no land to rule. Faced with this cataclysmic chain of failure, and understanding its future consequences, IS shifted its propaganda and broader strategy towards achieving an alternative source of legitimacy.

The Homegrown Solution: Legitimizing the Idea not the Caliphate

In mid-2015 as IS began to see its territorial caliphate shrink, it shifted its strategy to one more comparable to al-Qaeda: the promotion of homegrown terrorism abroad. IS's calls for homegrown terrorism is reflective of the anxious group's leadership turning towards the niche of other terrorist organizations for solutions to its compounding problems. Demonstrably incapable of defeating the near enemy at its gates, IS transitioned towards targeting the far enemy, with the United States, United Kingdom, and France as the new front lines to wage its mandated offensive jihad. Highly symbolic of this transition and the circumstances which prompted it is IS's abandonment of its two-year-old propaganda periodical *Dabiq*, and the creation of *Rumiyah* in its place. *Dabiq*, which was named in reference to the Syrian city IS believed would be the site of their victory over the armies of "Rome", was abandoned following the publication of its 15th issue, after

IS lost the city to Turkish backed forces. In response, IS began the publication of a new magazine, *Rumiyah* (Rome), and focused its content on alternative fronts in which IS was fighting around the world. Rather than romanticizing traveling to caliphate, IS began to romanticize fighting to defend the caliphate with attacks abroad.

IS began to advertise itself as a global idea that jihadists could support with attacks abroad, with an increasing emphasis on inspiring attacks by lone wolves. Lone wolves can be described as self-radicalized single-actors detached from terrorist hierarchies who are willing to conduct independent attacks within their home territory in the name of established causes with which they possess a self-proclaimed affiliation with. To radicalize these lone wolves, IS's propaganda apparatus targeted a demographic frequently labelled as "in-betweeners", described as young men, typically the sons of immigrants, who feel marginalized within Western societies and have yet to develop a real identity for themselves, making them more easily radicalized and manipulated into turning their loyalties away from their places of birth or domicile.¹² Both direct and indirect styles of propaganda are utilized to instigate homegrown terrorism from these in-betweeners, as well as other potential lone wolves. For its indirect style, IS highlights the anti-Muslim behaviors of Western states and the greatness of Islam in an effort to steer loyalties towards its own ideology. This style typically discredits Western states for their participation in the coalition against IS, labeling them as "crusader-states" fundamentally against Islam and Muslims.¹³ The alternative style is much more direct in clearly and explicitly calling upon its followers to conduct lone wolf attacks. Calls for lone wolf terrorism were, unfortunately, answered swiftly with several major attacks. Al-Adnani's May 2015 call for Muslims around the world to attack during Ramadan serves as the turning point of IS's broader strategy to retain relevance and legitimacy. It took only three days for a sympathizer to answer al-Adnani's call with an IS-inspired beheading in Lyon, France. Following the attack in Lyon, there was a substantial uptick in IS-inspired lone wolf attacks against the far enemy in Europe, North America, and elsewhere.

The promotion of lone wolf terrorism provides several distinct benefits for the retreating caliphate. First and foremost, it is a low-cost and simple strategy that requires minimal planning. Lone wolf terrorism is a decentralized tactic that is difficult to deter and detect because their attacks require little to no communication, and they typically have minimal, if any, traceable affiliation with known terrorists. Lacking the organizational constraints of group terrorism, lone wolves are more adept at conducting especially lethal attacks in countries with an advanced and pervasive counterterrorism capacity. Despite the meager resources necessary to produce lone wolf terrorism, such attacks induce fear and alarmism in host countries. By finding one-in-a-million sympathizers in a given country, IS can manage to portray itself as a growing global movement rather than a dwindling state.

Conclusion

The transition from a focus on the near enemy to the far enemy demonstrates a decreasing confidence in the future of IS's territorial caliphate. As exemplified by their propaganda, IS no longer places priority on recruiting potential jihadists to travel to the caliphate and has shifted to a new strategy to retain its relevance and legitimacy. By inspiring people from around the world to carry out attacks abroad, IS can continue to appear as a viable figurehead within the Salafi jihadist movement and a champion of the offensive jihad. The internet provides the perfect pathway for IS to survive as an idea, giving it the mechanism to spread its ideology and inspire enough lone wolves to survive, even as the wolf pack is cornered and its den is crumbling around them.

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¹² Scott Shane, Richard Pérez-Peña and Aurelien Breeden, “‘In-Betweeners’ Are Part of a Rich Recruiting Pool for Jihadists”, *The New York Times*, September 22, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/23/us/isis-al-qaeda-recruits-anwar-al-awlaki.html>.

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El Camino and the Way Ahead in the Persian Gulf

by Mark A. Caudill

Cognitive dissonance characterizes US foreign policy in the Middle East. In the Persian Gulf, for example, we have pursued a limited rapprochement with Iran while at the same time reassuring Saudi Arabia and its neighbors that we remain committed to their defense in the face of potential Iranian aggression. Pressed by each side to take a less equivocal stance, we have doubled down on trying to have it both ways.

Our aversion to unambiguous commitments is understandable: we've been burned before (Iran '79, Lebanon '83, Iraq '03). Absent a clear and compelling reason to go all-in on behalf of US strategic interests, Washington seeks to preserve sufficient room to lean one way or another as the tactical situation warrants. This approach brings to mind the El Camino, a half-car, half-truck vehicle last sold by Chevrolet in 1987.

Like the foreign policy it symbolizes, the El Camino at first blush appeared moderate and flexible. In some ways it was. Straddling the middle ground between moving people and hauling stuff, it could accomplish a bit of each. But the compromises inherent in the vehicle's design meant arriving at one's destination without everyone, or everything, that one needed or desired. Ultimately, consumers became dissatisfied, which explains why the El Camino has been out of production for 29 years.

With respect to Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the Gulf and beyond, both sides view the United States as part of the problem and part of the solution. Washington's 2015 nuclear accord with Tehran has opened the door to Iran's readmission into the community of nations, prompting the Arab sheikhs to fret that the United States will abandon them and their rentier states in favor of potential opportunities in the Iranians' larger, more diversified economy. Meanwhile, US policymakers have furnished the Saudis with intelligence, munitions, and logistical support in the latter's 18-month quest to vanquish Yemen's Houthi rebels, whom Riyadh (with only partial accuracy) regards as

Iranian proxies.¹

Driven by doubts about Washington's long-term reliability, the Saudis and Iranians have hedged their bets. Recognizing the need to reduce the Kingdom's reliance on oil, the sale of which accounts for at least 80 percent of government revenues, Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Muhammad bin Salman in April announced a major economic restructuring aimed at boosting income from industries outside the petroleum sector and establishing its own defense industry.² For its part, Tehran—in a bid to reduce its dependence on the US dollar—informed trading partners in February that it henceforth would bill them in euros, not dollars, for new and outstanding oil sales. Possessing the world's fourth-largest proven oil reserves, Iran for years has pushed for the euro to replace the dollar as the international oil trade currency of choice.³

Car or truck? That's the question the El Camino elicited from motorists, a question that Chevrolet tried—and failed—to answer with a resounding “yes.” Washington seems similarly incapable of recognizing that US policy in the Middle East must be clearly defined if it is to be enduringly effective. It is not that our allies and adversaries—be they the Saudis, the Iranians, or anyone else in the region—deserve to understand our intent. Rather, it is that the American people need to know US foreign policy practitioners and executioners can distinguish between passengers and cargo.

So, how to tell? Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab states are known quantities. Are their cultures and ours congruent or even remotely similar? No, though one suspects the lone Bedouin and the Marlboro Man probably would have little difficulty sharing a campfire, if not a smoke. Are the Arabs' political priorities and social values in line with our own? Again, the response—particularly taking into consideration Sunni extremism (including al-Qaeda and Islamic State terrorism) and human rights—must be negative. And what of commercial interests? Certainly, the Gulf Arabs' robust (albeit crony) capitalism for decades has meshed well with our own. They also share our goal of a stable and prosperous Middle East, though their paternalistic, paranoid predilections sometimes put them at odds with the US commitment to democratization and regional peace, including normalized relations with Israel.

Iran represents the unknown. President Hasan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif, who spearheaded the nuclear talks with Secretary of State John Kerry, are its moderate face—but not its only face. Conservatives in the political arena, led by newly elected Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, are newly resurgent.⁴ The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps are fighting alongside Assad's forces in Syria. Meanwhile, hardliners within the elderly, avowedly anti-US clerical establishment appear as unwilling as ever to deal away the *velayat-i faqih* (rule of the jurist) card enabling them to direct and dominate Iranian politics.

Confusing the known with the unknown could have dire consequences. As President John F. Kennedy often said, “Domestic policy can only defeat us; foreign policy can kill us.”⁵ Small wonder the El Camino begins to look like a reasonable way to hedge our own bets in the region.

Kennedy also famously remarked that great journeys begin with small steps.⁶ Fortunately, it is not necessary—or even important—to like those with whom we travel. What matters is whether we can trust them to follow through on their commitments. If so, we can accommodate them in our car: They may ride with us to the destination, strapped securely in the seat next to ours, gnawing on the incentivizing carrots we provide. If not, then we should put them in the back of the truck along with a goodly supply of sticks for use in threatening (and, if necessary, whacking) them if their misbehavior forces us to detour or pull over.

The Gulf Arabs are passengers. For all their peculiarities, they have a long track record of keeping their promises. In support of shared foreign policy goals, they have played host to US forces, including the Fifth Fleet (headquartered in Bahrain since 1995) and Central Command (forward headquarters in Qatar since 2002). They have quietly backed the Middle East Peace Process,

shared intelligence, and provided other assistance in the war on terror, and—since the 1973 oil embargo—have not brandished petroleum as a weapon.

The Iranians are cargo. Their history of sponsoring terrorism, their attempts to extend their influence by undermining stability in the Middle East, and their inflated self-regard as an exceptional civilization makes them untrustworthy. Did the 2015 nuclear accord affect anything? Yes and no. It certainly put the Persians on the path to possible passenger status someday. However, for the time being—and for as long as it takes for us to become convinced that real change has occurred in Tehran—they must remain consigned to the bed of the truck.

El Camino means “the way” in Spanish. The way ahead in the Gulf requires a hard-headed assessment of the best vehicles for reaching our goals. Car or truck? We should have one of each, and it is incumbent on US foreign policy practitioners and executioners—including diplomats proffering carrots and warfighters wielding sticks—to make this clear to the American people. We’re going to need a bigger garage.

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Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East 2015–2016: Pushing on an Open Door

by Robert O. Freedman

There is no question that Russia has been very active in the Middle East over the last year, especially in Syria. There is a question, however, as to whether Moscow has been able to transform this activity

into actual influence in the region. I would argue that the answer to this question is yes, but only because acts of omission and commission by the United States greatly facilitated Russian policy in the Middle East. This was particularly the case in countries as diverse as Egypt, Turkey, Israel, Iran and Syria.

Egypt

In the case of Egypt, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi took power in what might be called a popular coup in July 2013. The United States did not quite know how to handle the situation, and decided to partially interrupt its supply of weapons to Egypt, including helicopters, which Egypt needed to combat the growing insurgency in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula by an affiliate of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Russian President Vladimir Putin saw his opportunity and offered to sell arms to Egypt, and after Sisi's visit to Russia, Putin was warmly received in Egypt.¹ Among the weapons systems which Moscow has offered to Egypt are naval helicopters—ironically for the MISTRAL helicopter carriers which Egypt purchased from France after France refused to sell the MISTRAL to Russia because of its annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine. Russia and Egypt also recently carried out joint naval and ground exercises, and, perhaps more important, in October 2016 Egypt voted for a Russian resolution on Syria at the United Nations—the only Arab and Muslim state to do so.² While the terrorist attack that brought down a Russian charter plane flying back from Egypt led to a sharp drop in the flow of Russian tourists to Egypt, the two nations are now very close, despite the resumption of US military supplies to Egypt.

Russia values its relationship with Egypt—as a Sunni Arab state with which it cooperates closely, as can be seen both by the joint military exercises and the Egyptian vote at the UN Security Council. Since Moscow is closely tied to the Shi'ite coalition fighting in Syria, consisting of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, Iran, Hizbollah and other Shi'ite militias, with Russia providing the air power; it is not in the interest of Russian policy in the Middle East only to be identified with Shi'ite countries, given the rising Sunni-Shi'ite tensions in the region. Consequently, Egypt, as a major Sunni Arab state with close ties to Russia, demonstrates that Russia has an important Sunni friend in the Middle East. Indeed, by sending high-ranking representatives, including from Al-Azhar, to a Muslim conference in Grozny, Chechnya in September 2016, which castigated both Salafi and Wahhabi versions of Islam,³ Egypt has demonstrated its interest in a close relationship with Russia, although the United States, at least for the time being, remains Egypt's major arms.

Turkey

Turkey is another Sunni power in the Middle East, albeit not an Arab one, with whom relations have recently improved. While Russian-Turkish relations nosedived after a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian SU-24 bomber in November 2015, they began to recover after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan apologized for the incident. This was the case because Erdoğan came to the conclusion that he needed Russian support, or at least acquiescence, when Turkey intervened in Northern Syria to prevent the US-backed Syrian Kurdish forces—the Democratic Union Party (PYD), who were linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), against whom Turkey was fighting in Southeast Turkey—from creating a contiguous area of control along Syria's northern border, adjacent to the Turkish border. Turkish-Russian relations improved further in mid-July when Russia immediately backed Erdoğan during the 15 July 2016 coup attempt against him, while the US was slower to give the Turkish president its full support. Indeed, many in Turkey blamed the United States, if not for masterminding the coup attempt, then at least for giving asylum to the alleged coup leader Fethullah Gülen and resisting Turkish efforts to extradite him from the United States.

The end result of the Turkish-Russian rapprochement was that virtually all of the bilateral projects

suspended when the Russian plane was shot down were reinstated, and Russia again permitted the importation of Turkish agricultural goods, such as fruit, and Russian tourists may soon be returning to Turkey in large numbers, thus helping the hard-hit Turkish tourist industry. The restored projects included the TurkStream natural gas pipelines, which, supplementing the already existing Blue Stream pipeline, will provide Turkey with 15.75 billion cubic meters of natural gas for its domestic use and another 15.75 bcms for transshipment to Europe, thus enabling Russia to bypass the pipeline through Ukraine and substituting for the South Stream pipeline blocked by Bulgaria.⁴ In addition, Russia and Turkey put the Akkuyu nuclear plant on a fast track for completion, a project for which the Russian firm Rosatom will supply four reactors. Finally, Turkey invited Russia to resubmit a tender for an anti-aircraft system turned down by Turkey three years before for being too expensive.⁵

The one remaining problem for Russian-Turkish relations, and it is a serious one, relates to Syria. The recent Turkish incursion into Syria, and its continued advocacy of a “no-fly” zone in Northern Syria pose a problem of choice for Moscow since the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad has denounced the Turkish intervention, and because Moscow is committed, at least in theory, in the words of Dmitry Peskov, Putin’s spokesman, to help Assad regain “every inch” of Syria.⁶ Nonetheless, from Moscow’s perspective the problem can hopefully be finessed given the fact that the dominant goal in Syria for Turkey today is control of Syria’s Kurds, while for Moscow the goal is to weaken Turkey’s alignment with the United States and NATO. However, given the mercurial nature of Turkish President Erdoğan it may be more difficult than Putin thinks to finesse the problem.

Israel

While Israel is neither Arab nor Sunni, it is an important country for Russia in the Middle East and relations have grown closer over the past year. One of the attractions of Israel to Moscow is the more than one million strong community of emigres from the former Soviet Union, who maintain close economic and cultural ties to Russia. It is one of the diasporas which Putin hopes to use to spread Russia’s “soft power” around the world, and Putin may have welcomed the fact that one of the emigres, Avigdor Lieberman, is now Israel’s defense minister, a man, who, when he served as Israel’s foreign minister called Israel’s relations with Russia “strategic”. Also attractive to Moscow is Israel’s high tech industry, especially nanotechnology. Moscow also exploits the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to play a role in Middle East peacemaking—whether or not any peace results from its efforts—and this appears to be the aim of Russian Prime Minister Medvedev’s visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories in November 2016. Russia and Israel also cooperate militarily, as the two countries have collaborated in producing an AWACS plane, and Israel sold Russia a drone system after Russian drones performed poorly in the 2008 Russian-Georgian war.⁷

In the last year Russian-Israeli relations drew closer primarily because of the Russian military involvement in Syria. The Israelis saw US inaction as Russia militarily entrenched itself in Syria as one more example of the Obama Administration’s disengagement from the Middle East, and the US nuclear agreement with Iran, a country sworn to Israel’s destruction, was seen by Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, as an example of the US undermining of Israel’s interests. As the war in Syria intensified with Russian bombing of ISIL and non-ISIL targets, Netanyahu made a number of trips to Russia to underscore Israel’s “red lines” in the conflict—preventing Iran and Hizbollah from setting up a new front against Israel near the Golan Heights and preventing the supply of sophisticated weapons to Hizbollah. Coordination with the Russians, whose S-400 anti-aircraft system’s controlled much of Syrian airspace, was necessary for Israel to achieve its objectives as it periodically bombed Iranian and Hizbollah positions. So far, at least, Netanyahu’s Russian policy seems to have worked, as the Russians have not engaged any of the Israeli aircraft flying on missions over Syria. For his part, Putin—who wined and dined Netanyahu during the Israeli leader’s June 2016 visit to Moscow, and even gave him a private tour of the Kremlin—

seemed to relish demonstrating his close personal ties to the Israeli leader at a time when Netanyahu's ties with US President Barack Obama were badly strained.⁸

Nonetheless, unlike the case of Turkey it is unlikely that Russia will be able to pry Israel away from its tight bond to the United States. The two countries have recently signed a ten year, 38 billion dollar military assistance agreement, Russia continues to provide military aid to Israel's enemies, Syria and Iran, and Moscow also recently voted for the Arab-supported UNESCO resolution that denied any Jewish claim to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem.

Iran

Russian-Iranian relations also grew closer in the past year. In part, this was due to the final delivery of the long-promised S-300 anti-aircraft system to Iran, after friction caused by the suspension of the sale in 2010, and in part to the Russian-Iranian collaboration in propping up the Assad regime in Syria. Russia may have also been heartened by the fact that despite the Obama Administration's perhaps naïve hopes for an improvement in US-Iranian relations after the signing of the nuclear agreement, the public pronouncements of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and those of the leadership of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)—who are very powerful both politically and militarily in Iran—were as vitriolic against the United States as before the agreement was signed. It appeared the Iranian President Hasan Rouhani, who did want an improvement in US-Iranian relations, could do little in the face of opposition by Khamenei and the IRGC. In addition, incidents such as the mistreatment of US sailors who strayed into Iranian waters and the continued imprisonment of dual US-Iranian nationals further undermined US-Iranian relations. Indeed, throughout 2016 Russia and Iran reinforced each other's anti-American positions.

To be sure there were frictions in the relationship, although they were minor. Thus Tehran complained about Russia's publication of the fact that it had used an Iranian airfield to bomb anti-Assad rebels in Syria, and Moscow could not have been too happy about the return of Iranian oil to an already glutted market, although Russia publicly called for a higher quota for Iranian oil during negotiations with OPEC nations about stabilizing oil prices.⁹ Nonetheless, it will be many years before Iran can modernize its oil and natural gas production facilities to the point that it can be a real competitor to Russia in world oil and natural gas markets.

Syria

The Russian military intervention into Syria accomplished a number of goals for Moscow.¹⁰ First, it demonstrated that Russia stands by a Middle Eastern ally—in sharp contrast to the failure of the United States to stand by then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at a similar time of crisis. Second, it demonstrated that Russia has the power to prevent a regime change by force, orchestrated by the United States, as had happened in Libya. Third, it moved Russia from the position of relative diplomatic isolation, to which it had been cast after its annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine. Indeed, it had become abundantly clear by February 2016 that without Russia, there would be no solution to the Syrian crisis, as the US Secretary of State John Kerry has been scurrying after his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in a so far futile effort to achieve a peace agreement in Syria. Fourth, as part of Putin's efforts to demonstrate that Russia is again a great power, the military intervention in Syria gave Russia a chance to demonstrate its military power, not only bombing Assad's opponents from its new airbase in Syria, but also firing cruise missiles at them from the Caspian Sea and from the Mediterranean as well. A related benefit to Moscow may be the opportunity to sell battle-proven weapons on world markets, although since the anti-Assad rebels have had no serious anti-aircraft weapons such as man pads—at least so far—and a Russian SU-24 was shot down by an American-made F-16, how successful Russian sales on world markets

will be remains to be seen. Fifth, Russia has acquired a major airbase in Syria (Hmeimim), and using its S-400's controls a considerable amount of airspace in the Middle East. It is now also in the process of expanding its naval facility in the Syrian port of Tartus from several floating docks and warehouses into a full-fledged naval base, one now protected by the S-300 anti-aircraft system.¹¹ A sixth gain, as noted above is the reinforcement of relations with Iran, the primary backer of the Assad regime.

To be sure much of the Russian success in Syria was made possible by the failure of the United States to take serious military action in that country to help the anti-Assad rebels, especially before the jihadists became influential in the movement in 2014. President Obama's campaign mantra in 2012, "I got us out of Iraq, I'm getting us out of Afghanistan, I'm not getting us into Syria" persists as far as Syria goes, although US troops are back in Iraq to deal with the threat from ISIL, and the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, given the resurgence of the Taliban there, is likely to be delayed for a considerable amount of time. Essentially, President Obama has seen Syria as a quagmire with no military solution, and despite calling for the ouster of Assad, has concentrated US efforts in that country on combatting ISIL. However, the decisive Russian military in Syria has demonstrated, at least so far, that far from being a quagmire Russian military intervention in Syria has had a major effect, strengthening both the military and political positions of the Assad regime to the point that if serious peace negotiations ever begin, the Assad regime, backed by Russia, will be in a dominant position, or if military activity continues, Assad, with the help of Iran, Hizbollah and other Shi'ite militias, together with Russian air power, should be able to dominate Western Syria, where the bulk of the Syrian population and its major cities (Homs, Hama, Damascus and Aleppo) are located.

Conclusions

In sum, when one analyzes Russian policy in the Middle East over the past year, it is clear that the increased Russian influence in countries such as Egypt, Turkey, and Israel is due as much to acts of omission or commission by the United States, which Russia took advantage of, as to policy initiatives by Moscow. In the case of Syria it was Russian military action to which the US had no effective response, and in the case of Iran it was due to the belated supply of the S-300's, a common effort to support the Assad regime, and a common anti-American position that reinforced Russian-Iranian relations. There is no question that Russia plays a more influential role in the Middle East today than it did before its military intervention in Syria. Whether the incoming US administration can reverse the Russian momentum remains to be seen.

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Notes:

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² "Russia Vetoes France's Draft UN Resolution on Syria; Russian Draft Rejected", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 8, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-vetos-france-un-resolution-aleppo-syria/28040146.html>.

³ Cited in Yaroslav Trofimov, "Sunni Split Threatens Saudi Influence", *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 2016, <http://www.commoditiescontrol.com/commodity-market/dowjonescommoditiesnews/sunni-split-threatens-saudi-influence-wsj-20160923DN001070.html>.

⁴ Nerdun Hacıoğlu, "Turkish Stream Deal May be Signed During Putin's Visit: Russian Minister", *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 9, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-stream-deal-may-be-signed-during-putins-istanbul->

visit-russian-minister.aspx?pageID =238&nID=104756&NewsCatID=348; and “Turkey, Russia Strike Strategic Turkish Stream Gas Pipeline Deal”, Hurriyet Daily News, October 10, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-russia-strike-strategic-turkish-stream-gas-pipeline-deal.aspx?pageID =238&nID=104822&NewsCatID=348>.

⁵ Burak Ege Bekdil, “Turkey Invited Russian Bid for Air defense Contract”, *Defense News*, October 10, 2016, <http://www.defensenews.com/articles/turkey-invites-russian-bid-for-air-defense-contract>.

⁶ Cited in Vladimir Isachenkov and Bassem Mroue, “Kremlin: Demands for Assad’s Departure Thoughtless”, *Associated Press*, October 22, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/921f9f1fb42e4e05aef0e7958b439460/kremlin-demands-assads-departure-thoughtless>.

⁷ For a background on Russian-Israeli relations before 2015, see Robert O. Freedman, “Israel and Russia: Jerusalem and its Relations with Moscow Under Putin”, in *Israel and the World Powers*, ed. Colin Shindler (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2014).

⁸ For a study of the deterioration of relations between Obama and Netanyahu, see Robert O. Freedman, “The Erosion of US-Israeli Relations in the Second Obama Administration”, *Israel Affairs*, forthcoming, February 2017.

⁹ Cited in David Sheppard, “Iran offers Cautious Support to Oil Freeze”, *Financial Times*, September 6, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/4c15a264-7413-11e6-bf48-b372cdb1043a>.

¹⁰ For a study of Russian involvement in Syria, see Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russia and the Syrian Conflict: Moscow’s Domestic, Regional and Strategic Interests* (Berlin: Gehlrich Press, 2016).

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Continuity, Change, and the Islamic Republic of Iran

Regional Implications of the Iran Nuclear Deal

by Hussein Banai

A year and a half since the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the permanent five countries of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1), not much has changed in Iran’s regional behavior. This was to be expected, given the fact that JCPOA was exclusively an arms control agreement and did not touch on Iran’s foreign relations.

In Syria, where the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) paramilitary and intelligence units have been most active since the start of the popular uprisings against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Iran’s policy has remained consistent despite the infusion of Russia military assistance on the side of Assad. Having a strategic foothold in the Levant has been a longstanding priority of the IRGC’s, which almost defines its legitimacy almost solely in terms of its defense of the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary ideals against Arab and Israeli interests in the region. The longevity of the Assad regime in Syria, therefore, not only safeguards Iran’s proxy, Hizbollah, in next-door Lebanon, but also keeps intact its strategic clout around Israel. JCPOA had no discernible effect on either one of these priorities.

Similarly, Iran's contentious relationship with Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf Arab monarchies have continued along the same path as before. Prior to the signing of the JCPOA, Saudi Arabia made no secret of its opposition to the Obama administration's diplomatic dialogues with Iran (the first of such contacts since 1980), and warned of dire consequences in the form of increasing Iranian belligerence and anti-Sunni activity. Since JCPOA, the rhetorical and proxy wars between Iran and the Kingdom in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have continued apace. Some had feared the beginning of an arms race between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but the military guarantees provided by the United States coupled with the apparent internal instability in the Kingdom have thus far precluded that possibility.

From the standpoint of sectarianism in the region, too, Iran's role in fortifying Shi'ite political parties and militias in the Iraq, Syria, and Yemen has continued along the same lines as before the signing of JCPOA. Iran's leaders view the presence of a solid Shi'a crescent from western Afghanistan to the shores of the Mediterranean as an important instrument for the spread of their cultural and national interests in the region. It is important to note here that even through some of the most isolated periods of its existence the Islamic Republic has managed to project its influence in pursuit of such causes. After all, it was during the highly solitary eight-year period of the Iran-Iraq War that the IRGC founded and nourished Hizbollah in southern Lebanon. The removal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the aftermath of the "Arab Spring" simply have provided Iran with greater freedom of movement to consolidate otherwise disparate pockets of Shi'ite populations in Sunni-majority countries.

Lastly, the continuity in Iran's pursuit of the preceding set of interests can best be gleaned through its actions against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Iranian leaders view the advent of ISIL as a symptom of the broader malaise engulfing Sunni Arab countries in the region, which first revealed itself in the 2010-11 Arab uprisings. ISIL is far less a threat to Iran's interests than it is to the Arab-led regional order. As such, Iran's leaders have sought to exploit this vacuum by increasing their military and political support to Shi'ite actors in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen—all under the guise of combating ISIL terrorism.

The JCPOA was a signal achievement in halting Iran's nuclear program and committing it to a far more stringent set of obligations and intrusive inspections than those required by the Nonproliferation Treaty. As of this writing, both Iran and the other parties to the agreement verifiably have complied with the letter of the JCPOA. Since the signing of the deal, Iran's regional behavior has remained consistent with its past actions and policies, which, given the limited scope of the JCPOA, was to be expected.

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The Challenge of the IRGC Model in the Middle East to the United States

by Alex Vatanka

For the Trump administration, the various challenges presented by Iran will be a key test for American policy in the Middle East. One of the first steps the Trump White House should take is to stop compartmentalizing its Iran policy.

The excessive differentiation between Iranian "hardliners" and "moderates" by the outgoing Obama administration has proven to be entirely unhelpful in arming the US to counter ongoing Iranian threats to the national security of the US and its regional allies.

This is an important point. There are still plenty of voices in Washington that argue that the safeguarding of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran still needs to be prioritized above all. This is a mistake and unnecessarily limits the needed US pushback against Iran's expansionist policies in the region.

Cutting back on the number of centrifuges is not tantamount to moderation of Iranian behavior. Nor has it proven to be the case. The team of President Trump needs to, early on, publicly and forcefully highlight Iranian interventionist behavior that has one aim: the expansion of Iranian power.

The so-called "moderates" are not, in fact, in charge of Iran's regional policies. The forces—principally the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)—that run Iran's ideologically, and often sectarian, regional policies, are not interested in finding accommodation with Washington.

Take the case of Iraq. Since 2003, all of Iran's ambassadors to Baghdad have come straight from the ranks of the Qods Force, the external branch of the IRGC that is run by General Qasem Soleimani. It is the men in IRGC uniform that are, in essence, in operational control of Tehran's regional actions, and the many conciliatory statements made by Foreign Minister Javad Zarif amount to little in this vital context.

The top brass at the IRGC is a close-knit group of men that has been working closely with one another for some 40 years. Anti-Americanism is a core part of their worldview. They are, however, not suicidal as such and forceful US stance against their policies is highly likely to shape their calculations. There are already signs that the IRGC bosses believe it is essential that they reduce provocations against the US as the Trump team moves into the White House. As one top IRGC general, Mohsen Rezai, put it, "there are some sensitive days ahead between Iran and the American generals."

Assertive posturing is the only way the US can push back against the spread of the worst tendencies of the Iranian regime. At home, it took these hardliners some 20 years to impose their rule over the Iranian people. These same Iranian hardliners are hell-bent on spreading their way of life to other parts of the Middle East. Witness in Iraq where the IRGC is busy creating a minion of itself in the shape of the Shi'a militia movement that goes by the name of Hashd Shaabi or "Popular Mobilization Forces".

The generals of the IRGC have made plenty of inroads across the region thanks to conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain and elsewhere. But the US is capable to counter this Iranian threat if it prioritizes a concerted effort to counter it. The future of US national security interests in the broader Middle East depends on it.

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The Lion in between the Bear and the Eagle

by Amin Tarzi

In the midst of prospects of better coordination and understanding between Russia and the United States in their counterterrorism policies in the Middle East, the trajectory of their respective relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran may become the litmus test for their future cooperation or confrontation in the Middle East.

Until recently, relations between Moscow and the other two have been frigid. The last country to which Iran lost a war resulting in major territorial concessions was Russia in the nineteenth century.

An argument can be made that the first major rupture of the Second World War alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States and the beginnings of the Cold War began after the Soviet Union refused to leave northern parts of Iran that it wanted to form into Soviet-dependent Azeri and Kurdish republics. In that episode, the United States helped protect Iran's territorial integrity.

The current warming of relations between Tehran and Moscow can be understood through the prism of shared concerns, such as stability of Bashar Assad regime in Syria, the advent of the Islamic State phenomena threatening both countries, common concerns about the future of Afghanistan, and until recently, the distrust of the United States generally and Washington's Middle East policies in particular. It is in Syria where Iran and Russia have had an unprecedented level of commonality in their political goals and in coordination of military efforts.

While the political aims of Moscow and Tehran converge on safeguarding the Assad regime and defeating Sunni jihadists, their longer-term objectives do not. Iran wants to turn Syria into its proxy in the Arab world and a springboard for expanding its Islamic revolutionary mindset. Russia is using the Syrian theatre for cementing its military reach and proving its trustworthiness in the region, thereby expanding its political clout and armament market. Despite all of the coziness between the two partners, there is evidence of a cooling trend. Iran terminated Russia's rights to use a military base for its air assets in 2016, while Moscow is courting the new US administration to join the Syrian peace talks over Iran's objections.

The strategic objectives of Russia and Iran in Syria notwithstanding, until the change of administration in the United States, Moscow and Tehran found cooperation viable mainly due to their shared opposition to Washington. However, for Moscow, the prospect of a more constructive relationship with Washington is good news for matters with much greater strategic significance than Syria. The intensification of Iran-US tensions could weaken the prospects of an improved relationship unless Russia changes course on its policies on Iran including but not limited to stopping its coordinated military campaigns in Syria and the final delivery of S-300 SAM systems.

Russian ambassador to Tehran Levan Dzagharyan recently told the Iranian press that his country was concerned with the "escalation of rhetoric" between Washington and Tehran, adding that Moscow would spare no effort to help reduce the tension between the two countries. The question those in Tehran might be asking is how trustworthy is Russia's friendship. Here history should help inform Iranian calculations.

Should the new US administration and Russia pursue a renewed strategy in Syria, Iran may start feeling like Russia's jilted lover, replaced by Turkey. Iran's absence or diminished presence in designing Syrian solutions would empower Turkey to push harder its strategic objectives in the region and necessitate the United States to reevaluate and reinvigorate its relations with Turkey. The immediate outcome for such an approach would be the survivability of the Assad regime and a reassessment of the Kurdish question. This would be a victory for Russia and Turkey, not Iran.

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Iran and Russia Reenter the Afghan Conflict

by Amin Tarzi

The first combat zone use of the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) device by US forces in Afghanistan (USFOR-A) on 13 April 2017 brought the Islamic State–Khurasan Province (ISKP) to the headlines. ISKP emerged in Afghanistan and Pakistan in early 2015 with individuals or disparate groups of militants pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and became operationally active after few months. ISKP represents a danger to the stability of Afghanistan and Pakistan as well the wider region including India and Central Asia. I argue that, beyond that, the outfit has become a vehicle to legitimize the growing internationalization of the wider Afghan conflict, in particular the changing calculus of Iran and Russia vis-à-vis the Taliban, and has the potential to become a tool for proxy warfare in Afghanistan evocative of the mid-1990s.

The Taliban and ISKP

Since their emergence in the mid-1990s, unlike the self-identified Islamic State (IS), the Taliban has sought international legitimacy. The initial proclamations coming from the Taliban's Islamic Emirate were mostly Afghan-centric. However, with the cementing of their ties with al-Qaeda, their views took on a more pan-Islamist outlook. Retrospectively, the strategies of the Taliban and those of al-Qaeda differed fundamentally, as the former wanted to become a national movement and be recognized by the international community as such, while the latter wanted to keep Afghanistan in a perpetual state of anarchy, using it as a base for waging global jihad. Currently, the majority of the Taliban have returned to the founding Afghanistan-centric principles of the movement with an arguably less religiously zealous message, calling on Muslims to avoid extremism in religion with the goal of becoming a legitimate force in the political arena of the country as well as in the international calculations on Afghanistan. Perhaps learning from their initial mistakes, the reemerging Taliban have tried to speak for the totality of Afghanistan, including providing assurances that they will respect the rights of the Shi'ites and other minorities within the country. Nevertheless, the Taliban remain a violent insurgency and are very keen not only on retaining their monopoly over this violence but also on controlling and managing it to help calibrate the reactions of both domestic and foreign actors.¹

The emergence of ISKP occurred in a highly sensitive period for the Taliban who had lost its elusive, but unifying founding leader sometime in Spring 2013. The movement managed to keep a lid on Mullah Muhammad Omar's demise until it was officially revealed two years later by the Afghan government. During this time, however, the Taliban was dealing with internal fractures due to power struggles for leadership in a time when major decisions needed to be taken on whether and how to make peace with the Afghan government, to open dialogue with foreign countries, and to shape relations with their host Pakistan in addition to decisions on military matters and expanding their areas of operation. Following the confirmation of Mullah Omar's passing, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur became the new amir al-muminin (commander of the faithful), but disagreements remained among top members of the movement over leadership positions. The Taliban leadership experienced another setback in May 2016 when the United States conducted an airstrike, killing Mansur. Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, then, became the leader.

ISKP took advantage of the discontent within Taliban ranks and the rifts they were experiencing

with their erstwhile allies the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). ISKP used the absence of and later the confirmation of the demise of Mullah Omar in their propaganda courting disgruntled members of the Taliban, arguing that he no longer was the legitimate leader of the Islamic community or the Taliban Emirate. The TTP and IMU were increasingly at odds with the Taliban due to the latter's refusal to conduct and support operations inside Pakistan and began to align with ISKP. ISKP's ranks increased, albeit slowly at first. As they became stronger and more active, tensions between the two groups grew, as they vied for power and territory.

Tensions turned to confrontations in 2015. The main arena of Taliban-ISKP military confrontations was in southern districts of Nangarhar Province. The Taliban also started campaigns against ISKP affiliates and supporters elsewhere in Afghanistan with notable success. In November, the Taliban gained a decisive victory in the southern Afghan province of Zabul against IMU—ISKP's main Uzbek affiliate. The Taliban also defeated the mainly Uzbek Jundullah, an IMU splinter group operating in northeastern Afghanistan in proximity to Tajikistan.² These victories were a two-pronged blessing for the Taliban. First, the Taliban stopped a major local rival from gaining a foothold in the country and reversed the brief territorial gains made by Jundullah in northeastern Afghanistan. Second, these events were propaganda boons for the Taliban in Central Asian, Chinese, and Russian circles where the Uzbek-dominated groups are regarded as a serious threat to the security and stability of Central Asian states and, by extension, Russia as well as China's Xinjiang Province.

Iran

Iran's longstanding policy for Afghanistan has been to prevent the full stabilization of a unitary Afghanistan while Kabul is supported by the United States and simultaneously to help prevent the total collapse of order in its eastern neighbor. In Tehran's Jekyll and Hyde gameplay in Afghanistan, Iran has regarded the Taliban as a staunch enemy yet a useful ally to oppose USFOR-A and, prior to that, the broader NATO-led coalition. With the advent of ISKP, the stakes for Tehran are higher and so is the utility of the Taliban as a tool to counter the radical Sunni movement. This brings Iran closer in partnership with Russia as both countries follow steadfast policies of denying a victory to Western plans for the Afghan state's rehabilitation.

In its initial campaign to gain control of Afghanistan in the 1990s, the Taliban, at times, targeted Shi'ites due to their religious affiliation not just because of their refusal to submit to Taliban rule. As the movement gained more authority, its anti-sectarian tendencies diminished but never ceased. Currently, the Taliban, in spite of its alliances with militant jihadist outfits with anti-sectarian doctrines, has by-and-large stayed away from sectarianism and has called on the Shi'ites to join the Taliban movement as an Islamic—rather than just Sunni—national liberation front. There are no credible statistics on the number of Shi'ites among Taliban ranks; however, these numbers ought to be small given the low level of support for the Taliban in the predominantly Shi'ite regions of Afghanistan. The first manifestation of the Taliban's strategy of inclusivity was in July 2016. ISKP claimed responsibility for an attack on a predominately Shi'ite demonstration, resulting in the death of 80 individuals and demonstrating their reach into Kabul. In response to Taliban condemnation, ISKP issued a fatwa claiming that the Shi'ites were undisputedly infidels, adding that any Sunni religious scholar who rejects this understanding and the permissibility of their killing is himself an apostate. In October two attackers targeted a popular shrine during Ashura—the commemoration of death of Husayn, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad who is considered by the Shi'ites as their third imam—killing 19 people.³ The Taliban's response shows how the group has evolved since its emergence in the 1990s. The Taliban condemned ISKP's attacks, referring to the Shi'ites as their “brothers.”⁴

While the Taliban's change of policy on sectarianism is undertaken primarily for their domestic

reasons, the inclusiveness of the movement's message has made the Taliban more publicly palatable in Iran. In preparation for the latest conference of the Iran-based World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought that was held in Tehran in December 2016, according to its Secretary-General Ayatollah Mohsen Araki, invitations were extended to some "figures in the Taliban movement who believe in the unity of Muslims."⁵

The Taliban's strengthening bonds with Shi'ite Iran challenge ISKP and the broader Sunni Arab-dominated IS community. Within ISKP's foreign and domestic members, discontent with current Taliban leadership's Shi'ite-tolerant or Shi'ite-friendly policies is growing. There are dangers that the hallmark sectarianism used by IS in Iraq and Syria could be mobilized to further push Afghanistan's war towards a more sectarian conflict. Such a move could potentially reignite the regional proxy war in Afghanistan with realigned alliances and newcomers. It could also increase the threat to global security emanating from the regions of Afghanistan that remain outside the control of the central government. Moreover, if the Afghan government's control over its territory deteriorates further, Iran could come to see the Taliban as their least threatening option, which would strengthen the complicating Iranian voice—regardless of whether Tehran directly participates—into the on-again, off-again peace negotiations with the Taliban. The United States is publicly acknowledging Tehran's backing of the Taliban as well as Iran's multidimensional relationship with the Afghan government.

Russia

Another player in this complex security environment not to be ignored is Russia. In their operations against IMU and their overall opposition to IS-inspired or backed groups, the Taliban has found a sympathetic ear in Moscow, potentially inducing the re-internationalizing of the Afghan conflict. Taliban successes prompted Zamir Kabulov, Russia's special envoy to Afghanistan, to state that "Taliban interests objectively coincide with ours."⁶ The potential is reminiscent of the 1990s proxy wars supported by India, Iran, and Russia on one side and Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and, to a certain point, the United States on the other—albeit two decades ago, the Taliban was the main challenge for the India, Iran and Russia triangle. To the discomfort of Kabul and New Delhi, the Russians with Iranian and Chinese support have opened a dialogue with the Taliban. Russia, along with Iran, China, and Pakistan, but without the participation of Afghanistan and India, held a meeting in Moscow in November 2016 to discuss countermeasures to the threats posed by ISKP. After complaints by Afghanistan and India, another meeting in Moscow was organized two months later that included representatives from Afghanistan and India. While specific information of what the Moscow talks entailed is unavailable, the maneuverings are eerily reminiscent of the political jockeying prior to and after the formation of the Taliban.⁷ The latest Russian-led talks on Afghanistan were held on the same day the United States dropped the MOAB on the ISKP target in Achin District of Nangarhar. The United States reportedly refused a Russian invitation to participate in the talks. According to commander of USFOR-A, General John W. Nicholson, "Russia has overtly lent legitimacy to the Taliban," and he added that Moscow, basing their position "not on facts," believes the Taliban is only engaged against ISKP and not the Afghan government.⁸

More recently, after the Taliban attacked the headquarters of the Afghan National Army's (ANA) 209th Corps based in Mazar-e Sharif on 22 April killing more than 140 ANA soldiers, the United States increased its criticism of Russia's support of the Taliban, including hints that Moscow was supplying small arms to the Taliban, which Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis sees as a "violation of international law" and something that the United States would "have to confront."⁹

Russia's involvement in Afghanistan as a political supporter of dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban, if coordinated with other stakeholders, including the United States, would add to the legitimacy and chances of a successful political outcome to the insurgency in Afghanistan. But Moscow's military support of the Taliban and promotion of parallel political processes will only

complicate the already fragile state of affairs inside Afghanistan and has the potential of opening greater opportunities for groups such as ISKP or terrorist or insurgent outfits to grow in strength at the expense of the Afghan government. While Russia has genuine concerns with the growth of pan-Islamist jihadist organizations such as ISKP, its romancing of the Taliban may be seen as part of Russia's ongoing and expanding competition with the United States. As in the case in Syria, the Kremlin's long-term goal is to push the United States out of Afghanistan, and in the short-term, it seeks to make the US deployment and stabilization policies in the country more difficult. This aligns conveniently with the Taliban's goal, as the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan is the Taliban's paramount demand for accepting a peaceful resolution of their insurgency.

Conclusions

The multiplicity of groupings and policies engaged in Afghanistan once again serves to potentially undermine peace and stability in Afghanistan. There is a risk to the continued legitimacy of the Afghan government. There is an incentive for the Taliban ranks to split to accommodate or take advantage of one or another of the various groups vying for the upper hand. Such a scenario would open more opportunities for ISKP or its future renditions, not only inside Afghanistan and Pakistan but also in Central Asia and India—Kashmir in particular.

Whereas Iran has been a constant player in Afghanistan since the 1978 Soviet-back communist coup d'état, since the demise of the Taliban in 2001, for the most part Tehran's policies and actions have been unilateral and uncoordinated with regional actors. The current support provided to the Taliban is, as in the case in Syria, coordinated with Russia despite overall strategic differences between the two countries' long-term priorities. The new alignments in Afghanistan have Russia and Iran together with China and Pakistan, less vocally involved, pushing for a reconciliation process between the Afghan government and the Taliban and at the same time, with the exception of China, lending support, including military support, to the Taliban. The wildcard in this game is Pakistan, the longtime backer and host of the Taliban. As echoed in early 2017 by General Nicholson, "the insurgents cannot be defeated while they enjoy external sanctuary and support ... in Pakistan."¹⁰ As the Taliban gain closer ties with Russia and Iran, ostensibly due to their opposition to ISKP, their submissiveness to Islamabad's directives should be expected to decrease. The question to consider is whether a Taliban with more freedom of political decision-making will emerge to seriously engage in peace negotiations with the Afghan government or whether ISKP will morph into a savvier spoiler role and create new alternatives to the Taliban, prolonging the instability in Afghanistan and the region.

In 2008, while serving as his country's ambassador to Afghanistan, Kabulov is reported to have said that the United States and its allies have repeated all of the Soviet mistakes, adding, "Now they are making mistakes of their own, ones for which we do not own the copyright."¹¹ It would be interesting to ask Ambassador Kabulov whether Russia owns the copyright on its reemergence in the Afghan scene.

Notes:

¹ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Blood and Faith in Afghanistan: A June 2016 Update," Brookings Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, (<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2016-Felbab-Brown-Paper-BLOOD-AND-FAITH-VFB.pdf>), 17.

² Obaid Ali, "The 2016 Insurgency in the North: Raising the Daesh flag (although not for long)," Afghanistan Analysts Network, 15 July 2016 (<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-2016-insurgency-in-the-north-raising-the-daesh-flag-although-not-for-long/>).

³ Casey Garret Johnson, "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, Special Report, 13; Borhan Osman, "With an Active Cell in Kabul, ISKP Tries to Bring Sectarianism to the Afghan War," Afghanistan Analysts Network, 19 October 2016 (<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/with-an-active-cell-in-kabul-iskp-tries-to-bring-sectarianism-to-the-afghan-war/>).

⁴ Osman, “Active Cell.”

⁵ “Iran hosts Taliban leaders at a conference in Tehran,” *Al-Arabiya* English, 14 December 2016 (<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/12/14/Iran-hosts-Taliban-leaders-at-a-conference-in-Tehran.html>); “Ayatollah Araki warns: KSA turning to Muslim dispersion base,” 5 January 2016 (<http://www.iuc.taghrib.com/en/news/nf-en-07>).

⁶ Javid Ahmad, “Russia and the Taliban Make Amends,” *Foreign Affairs*, 31 January 2016 (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2016-01-31/russia-and-taliban-make-amends>).

⁷ Suhasini Haidar, “India to join Moscow meet on Afghanistan,” *The Hindu*, 15 February 2017 (<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/India-to-join-Moscow-meet-on-Afghanistan/article17303436.ece>).

⁸ “DoD press briefing by Gen. Nicholson in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” 2 December 2016 (<https://www.defense.gov/DesktopModules/ArticleCS/Print.aspx?PortalId=1&ModuleId=1144&Article=1019029>).

⁹ Gordon Lubold and Habib Khan Totakhil, “U.S. Says Russia Arming Taliban,” *Wall Street Journal*, 25 April 2017.

¹⁰ Statement for the Record by General John W. Nicholson, Commander, U.S. Forces—Afghanistan before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan, Washington, 9 February 2017, 11.

¹¹ Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 201.

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Houthi Expansionism, Internal War, Geopolitics, and the Yemen Quagmire *

by Adam C. Seitz

As Yemen’s internal war continues to drag on with no end in sight, there is increased risk of miscalculations that may lead to further escalation and internationalization of the conflict. Increased regional and international geopolitical competition, continued efforts to combat the threat of international terrorism and Islamic extremism emanating from the region, and maritime security concerns that threaten the global economy and freedom of navigation have only increased Yemen’s strategic importance to the national security agendas of regional and international actors alike.¹ Such considerations have not been lost on Yemen’s domestic incumbent and insurgent elites, contributing, in part, to political and military strategies that seek to manage but not entirely eliminate internal security threats that pose challenges to the national security interests of regional and international actors. As such, Houthi expansionism and the ongoing internal war may be better understood in the context of the development of a domestic elite strategic culture that has contributed to perpetual insecurity and internal war in Yemen.

Strategic culture can be described as traditional practices and habits of thought by which military force is organized and employed by a society in the service of its political goals. When viewed through the lens of strategic culture, Houthi expansionism, and internal war in Yemen generally, should not be viewed as an aberration that seeks to change the status quo. Rather, it should be considered a continuation of established political norms and military-decisionmaking institutionalized under the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh, which seeks to balance a host of internal and external actors and potential threats within an environment dominated by elite competition and internal factionalization, in the absence of effective state institutions and a clear monopoly on the

use of violence by the state.

Such a governing strategy has contributed to the proliferation of militias and other irregular and non-state forces, military factionalization, and increasingly the formation of civil-military relations akin to warlordism, in which military and/or tribal elites exercise civil power at a local or regional level through their influence and control of militias.² Within this domestic environment, the military has played a central role in linking a number of disparate groups to the regime, while at the same time factionalization has allowed for effective divide and rule tactics to shield the regime from reprisal. Furthermore, the dependence of the Yemeni economy on a combination of oil revenues, remittances, and, increasingly, foreign aid has left the Yemeni government vulnerable to external market forces and shocks associated with geopolitical competition. Within this geopolitical setting, internal war and perpetual insecurity threatening regional and international interests have supported a growing war economy and helped to prop up the armed forces as a central player in patronage politics and the economy writ large through its role in the tribal-military-commercial complex and the Yemen Economic Corporation (YECO)—formerly the Military Economic Corporation or MECO—, which has its hands in nearly all facets of the Yemeni economy and serves as a conduit for foreign aid.³ A combination of British colonialism, eight-years of civil war following the 1962 Republican Revolution between Royalists supported by Saudi Arabia and Republicans supported by Egypt, and Cold War competition between the US and Soviet Union, has played a significant role in shaping Yemeni perceptions of regional and international players and in the development of strategic culture and narratives promulgated by Yemen’s military, commercial, tribal, and political elites.

In a survey published by the EU in 2009, the most common response to the question “how is Yemen going to get out of these problems?” was “we’ll blackmail our neighbors”.⁴ The statement underscores both a domestic understanding of Yemen’s economic dependence on external actors and factors, and foreign preoccupation with security challenges in southwest Arabia. Such thinking not only seems common vis-à-vis Yemen’s neighbor Saudi Arabia, but can also be observed at the local level—with attacks on oil pipelines and power infrastructure—as well as the international level—especially when considering US and European national security and economic interests. Such interests include the threats posed by international terrorism and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), an expanding Iranian footprint in the region, and a variety of threats to maritime security and the global economy emanating from Yemen and the Horn of Africa.

Yemen’s 1994 Civil War, its role in the “Global War on Terror”, and the Sa’da Wars underscore the utility of internal war and insecurity threatening the interests of external actors in maintaining and rebalancing patronage relationships, both internally and externally.

1994 Civil War: “Southern War of Succession”

Saleh used the threat posed by socialist forces of the former People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) to unite a number of disparate forces, including members of the Ali Nasir movement—which had fled to the north following a failed coup and civil war in the PDRY in the 1980s—and returning veterans of the Afghan war against the Soviets—who viewed the war against the separatists as an extension of the war against the former Soviet Union and the spread of socialism in the Arab world—to combat southern military forces. Saleh rewarded these groups with political and military appointments that afforded them special access to the sources of wealth in Yemen. Furthermore, the decisive defeat of southern insurgent forces opened up new revenue streams for the regime, and the military in particular, as the armed forces and militias seized property throughout the south. Through their role in YECO, Yemen’s officer corps and their tribal patrons have profited from lucrative deals with the lease and sale of seized southern assets.

Yemen and the “Global War on Terror”

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the start of the US-led “Global War on Terror”, Saleh sought to manage his relationships with domestic Islamist elements, attempting to minimize his visibility in US counterterrorism operations by relying on a combination of US counterterrorism units, drone strikes and tribal militias to combat al-Qaeda, while at the same time reaping whatever economic and political benefit he could from an external patronage relationship with Washington. Following Saleh’s ouster in 2011, Yemen’s transitional government led by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi doubled down on external patronage relations with Washington and Riyadh, as his domestic weaknesses pushed him to rely on external support to wrestle power from Saleh and his family, and establish his own domestic base.

The Sa’da Wars (2004-2010)

The Sa’da Wars between the Yemeni government and Houthi insurgents opened up new and significant revenue streams for incumbent and insurgent elites. These streams came from an increase in military aid from a number of external sources, a lack of oversight of military budgets and payroll—including the pervasiveness of “ghost-soldiers”, who are listed on military payrolls but never or rarely work with the pay being pocketed by military elites and equipment being sold on the black market—and the smuggling of arms, food rations, and diesel benefiting a host of interconnected actors. Additionally, the Sa’da Wars served as a means to rebalance forces and political patronage relations, as evidence suggests that the Saleh family sought to use the Sa’da Wars to discredit, marginalize, and possibly eliminate General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who they increasingly viewed as the greatest threat to their rule and the empire they had created. The Saleh regime’s reliance on a combination of regular and irregular forces under the command of General Ali Mohsen, tribal militias, and later Saudi Arabia to pursue the war against Houthi insurgents, allowed Saleh to escape much of the backlash associated with the tribal feuding and sectarian violence that ensued, and left much of the ire of the Houthis directed at those who engaged in direct combat operations against the Houthis, including Ali Mohsen, members of al-Islah party and the Hashid tribal confederation, and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, as mounting evidence surfaced that Iran was providing support to Houthi insurgents—no matter the true extent of such support—Saleh, and later Hadi, seized on growing tensions between Riyadh and Tehran to garner greater military, political, and economic support from Saudi Arabia.

Ultimately, neither Saleh nor Hadi could withstand the constraints associated with their foreign alliances, and the narrative turned into something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, allowing popular movements, insurgent forces, terrorist organizations, and foreign actors, to expand their influence and challenge Yemen’s incumbent elites. But the game seems far from over.

Houthi Expansionism and Internal War in Context

Within the ongoing civil war, the factors outlined above have manifested themselves in asymmetric military strategies that utilize a combination of irregular forces, assassinations and hit and run tactics, and rocket attacks that take advantage of the military and political weaknesses of and divisions between local, regional, and international actors. At the same time, while many Yemenis suffer, a host of intertwined military, tribal, and commercial elites have benefited from Houthi expansionism and geopolitical competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran through the growth of a burgeoning war economy propped up by the external military aid to incumbent and insurgent forces alike.

In 2014, Abdul-Qader Hilal, then mayor of Sanaa, highlighted the threat Houthi expansionism

posed to Saudi Arabia and regional stability, warning in an interview that “If the Houthis take Amran ... they will take Sanaa,” and “If they take Sanaa, we will be talking about [stability in] Riyadh a year later.”⁵ For Riyadh, Houthi expansionism is tantamount to Iranian expansionism along Saudi Arabia’s long and porous southern border and Iranian control of two of the region’s most strategic waterways, which is a nightmare scenario. For Tehran, the conflict in Yemen is a low cost-high reward theater—requiring few resources and providing ambiguity, while distracting Riyadh from Iran’s activities elsewhere and straining Saudi Arabia and allied forces, politically, economically, and militarily.

The fall of Amran, which had long served as the capital for the Hashid tribal confederation, to the insurgent forces was a symbolic victory for the Houthis and dealt a significant blow to Riyadh. While Saudi Arabia provided substantial aid to the Saleh regime and continues to support the Hadi government militarily, financially, and politically, Saudi elites have also paid substantial subsidies directly to “tribal and factional leaders” outside of, and sometimes acting in opposition to, the Yemeni government, most notably elites within the Hashid tribal confederation.⁶ Just as alarming for Saudi Arabia were reports that forces loyal to Saleh had aided the Houthis in their military campaign, and less than two months after the fall of Amran, Houthi militias were in control of a number of government buildings in Sanaa, military installations throughout the north, and strategic posts along the Red Sea, including the port city of al-Hodeida. Such military advances by the Houthis and their allies were aimed not only at gaining concessions from the Hadi government and securing access to the sources of wealth but also at positioning themselves to effectively extort Hadi’s external patrons. The loss of Saleh and later the Hashids left the Saudis with few viable partners for countering further Houthi expansion, and left Riyadh struggling to find credible allies in northern Yemen. This contributed to a situation in which Yemen’s tribal and military elites have essentially been empowered to extort Riyadh, and others, gladly taking handouts in the form of weapons and cash, while providing little to no support to the Saudi-led coalition in return.

On the surface such developments seem to reflect a significant shift in the balance of power in favor of the Houthis, but upon second look Houthi expansionism, and the political and military gains of the insurgents, would not have been possible without the support of Ali Abdullah Saleh and his well-established political, military, commercial, and tribal networks. Military factionalization and the proliferation of militias have provided a great deal of ambiguity and deniability for competing factions within the conflict. This is most apparent in cross border rocket attacks and raids and the threats posed to the shipping lanes in the Red Sea. Cross border provocations and harassment of naval vessels transiting the region serve to reinforce the perception that Yemen’s internal insecurity is a great risk for broader regional and international security interests, while also sewing division among the myriad of actors involved in the conflict. With forces loyal to the Houthis and Saleh controlling strategic territories bordering Saudi Arabia, and hugging the coastline of the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb, insurgent forces in Sanaa seek to negotiate from a position of power with those who they see as enabling incumbent elites in Aden—namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the US. With incumbent and insurgent forces essentially locked in a military stalemate, the targeting of external interests by insurgent forces can be viewed as an attempt to break the stalemate by dividing coalition forces and forcing the Hadi government to the negotiating table from a weakened position.

Although maritime attacks staged from Yemen’s coast have often been attributed to militias allied to the aggressors with great certainty. While protracted conflict has allowed the Houthis to avoid many of the challenges of governing, the Houthis may have less to gain from such provocative rocket attacks than other actors operating in the battlespace as they try to consolidate their power and domestic support around the threats posed by external aggressors, a reinvigorated secessionist movement, and terrorist groups such as AQAP. Rather, Saleh and members of his old guard may have the most to gain from such attacks, as Saleh seeks to reinsert himself as the most capable partner in securing the Red Sea coast and the freedom of navigation.

Saleh continues to wield a great deal of influence within the system he buttressed over the last three decades-plus and has used the opaque operating environment and other factors influencing strategic culture to his advantage. Amidst internal factionalization and geopolitical competition, his alliance with the Houthis has provided Saleh a great deal of ambiguity as to his role in the conflict, with the Houthis, Hadi, Saudi Arabia, and others taking much of the blame for the current crisis. In many ways, this is not so different from Saleh's strategy during the 1994 Civil War, the Sa'da Wars, or the "Global War on Terror". As such, Houthi expansionism is merely a means to an end for Saleh, much as previous instances of internal war and tacit alliances with General Ali Mohsen, the Ali Nasir movement, al-Islah, and members of AQAP, among others, have been at different points in time. The uncertainty that the operating environment offers may ultimately allow Saleh to be perceived as a rock of stability in a sea of chaos, both internally and externally, or at a minimum the least bad option, as his rivals and any credible partners are gradually being marginalized or removed from the political scene.

Conclusions: Geopolitical Competition + Internal War = Yemen Quagmire

While external actors are widely portrayed as waging a regional proxy war in Yemen, and many narratives frame the conflict in sectarian or regional geopolitical terms, in reality what is taking place in southwest Arabia is much more complex. Such characterizations of the conflict are misleading and do not adequately address the enduring role of domestic elite competition, warlordism, and the utility that Yemen's incumbent and insurgent elites place on regional competition and external intervention in pursuing their own domestic political and military agendas. As was the case in the 1994 Civil War, Yemen's role in the "Global War on Terror", and the Sa'da Wars, Houthi expansionism and the current conflict should be viewed as a means of shifting alliances and renegotiating patronage relationships—both internally and externally—and gaining or maintaining access to the sources of wealth. Furthermore, the situation outlined above highlights the utility of perpetual insecurity and internal war as a source of wealth in their own right.

The combination of military factionalization, the proliferation of militias, a burgeoning war economy, and geopolitical competition in a post-Arab Spring and post-Iran nuclear deal environment has empowered fringe groups, terrorist organizations, and warlords alike, making it all the more difficult to negotiate an end to the conflict. The challenge for external actors is how to protect their national security interests and support humanitarian efforts while avoiding costly miscalculations that may lead to further escalation and internationalization of the conflict. The reality is that a military solution to Yemen's internal war does not exist, and to avoid being perpetually trapped in the Yemen quagmire the international community must seek a political solution by applying coordinated pressure on warring parties to negotiate an end to the conflict.

Notes:

* The author presented an earlier version of this paper entitled "Strategic Implications of Huthi Expansionism, Perpetual Insecurity and Internal War in Yemen" at the Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association in Boston, MA on 19 November 2016.

¹ For an analysis of the threat that jihadists pose to maritime security and freedom of navigation, including off the coast of Yemen, see Norman Cigar, "The Jihadist Maritime Strategy: Waging Guerrilla War at Sea", *MES Monographs* No. 8, May 2017, https://www.usmca.edu/sites/default/files/MES/Monographs/MESM_8_MAY_2017_lo.pdf.

² Adam C. Seitz, "Ties that Bind, and Divide: The 'Arab Spring' and Yemeni Civil-Military Relations", in *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition*, Helen Lackner, ed. (London: Saqi Books, 2014).

³ For an examination of the role of the Yemeni armed forces in the economy and the tribal-military-commercial complex see Adam C Seitz, "Patronage Politics in Transition: Political and Economic Interests of the Yemeni Armed Forces," in *Businessmen in Arms: How the Military and Other Armed Groups Profit in the MENA Region*, Elke Grawert and Zeinab Abul-Magd, ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 157-174; and Adam C Seitz, "The Tribal-Military-Commercial Complex and the Challenges to Security Sector Reform in Yemen", in *Addressing Security*

Sector Reform in Yemen. Challenges and Opportunities for Intervention During and Post-conflict (Bonn: Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient, 2017), <http://carpo-bonn.org/en/addressing-security-sector-reform-in-yemen/>.

⁴ Neil MacDonald and Rana Khalil, “Report of the Assessment towards a ‘Whole of EU’ Approach to State Building in Yemen: Addressing Fragility to Prevent State Failure”, July 2009, p. 35. See also Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 74-85.

⁵ April Longley Alley, “Yemen’s Terrible War Is About to Get Worse,” *Foreign Policy*, 12 October 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/12/yemens-terrible-war-is-about-to-get-worse-saudi-united-states/>.

⁶ See “Saudi can play a role in building a stronger Yemen”, *The National*, 8 April 2013, <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/editorial/saudi-can-play-a-role-in-building-a-stronger-yemen>.

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Back to the Future: Trump’s Emerging Iran “Strategy”

by Daniel Brumberg

On 13 October 2017 President Donald Trump announced that his administration would not certify the Iran nuclear agreement, otherwise known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This announcement, he stated, was part of a new “strategy” designed to address “the full range of Iran’s destructive actions.”¹

It is hard to know where to begin in addressing this statement’s distortions. To take one example, Trump’s assertion that the Obama administration lifted sanctions “just before what would have been the total collapse of the Iranian regime” is outlandish. Still, this fantastical claim merits attention, if only because it might suggest that the administration is partly basing its new “strategy” on wishful thinking: namely the belief that Iran’s political system will collapse once subject to a renewed onslaught of punishing sanctions or to US military action.

We have been here before. For many decades US policy on Iran was incoherent, ineffective, and self-defeating. The expectation that “regime change” was probable, and even more, that it would be the silver bullet to slay the dragon of Iran’s nuclear program, was a tempting fantasy. Reliance on such dubious premises was rooted in many factors, not least of which was the understandable desire of successive White Houses to avoid taking hard decisions that might antagonize Middle East allies, not to mention the US Congress. But if the resulting policy incoherence was partly shaped by domestic and regional constraints, what distinguishes the Trump administration’s “strategy” is that *it is largely a function of the efforts of White House aides to shield US foreign policy from Trump’s rage*. As the *Washington Post* reported, “White House national security adviser H.R. McMaster and other senior advisers came up with a plan—one aimed at accommodating Trump’s loathing of the Iran deal...without killing it outright...To get Trump, in other words, to compromise.”²

This “compromise”—which would involve passing the decision of whether to certify the nuclear deal to the US Senate—could turn out to be disastrous. If the Senate imposes new sanctions or

conditions that are not spelled out in the JCPOA, it will kill the deal. Such an outcome might momentarily pacify Trump, but it will also undermine US credibility and worse, US security.

The credibility issue concerns not the content of the JCPOA but rather the fact of this international agreement itself. In this particular and crucial instance, reneging on a major international deal that is barely one and a half years old, and one that retains the backing of Western European States, and of Russia and China as well, could isolate the US. This is not an outcome Trump's advisers want. Indeed, their advice is clear. Asked during his Senate testimony whether it is in the US interest to stay with the agreement, Secretary of Defense James Mattis insisted that "if we can confirm that Iran is living by the agreement...we should stay with it." Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford stated that "Iran is not in material breach of the agreement, and I do believe the agreement to date has delayed the development of a nuclear capability by Iran."³

The agreement's opponents know that it is difficult to make a convincing case that Iran has explicitly and clearly violated the agreement. Thus, they have proposed an alternative: rather than jettison the JCPOA, the administration should use the threat of decertification to push the Europeans to endorse renegotiating the deal. But this is a smokescreen. Mark Dubowitz, chief of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, that Trump's "walkaway" is "already shifting the European positions from 'keep it' to 'keep it, but fix it.'"⁴ But my guess is that the demand for renegotiating the agreement is a tactical maneuver designed to kill rather than save the patient. More importantly, the Europeans know this. Ultimately, they will not play along.

And why should they given that all other options would prove costly to Western and US interests? When it comes to Iran's nuclear program, the challenge facing US policy makers has always been to choose between a short list of far from perfect options: war, containment, or negotiation. For many decades successive administrations struggled to make a clear choice or decide how to balance these three objectives. In a 2010 study group report that I and Barry Blechman helped to prepare for the United States Institute of Peace and the Stimson Center, we held that the key strategic challenge for the US was to decide whether to sustain a policy premised on the idea that military force or punishing sanctions would compel Iran to abandon the quest for a domestic nuclear fuel cycle.⁵ The answer, we suggested, was a clear "no." Thus the US's best option was abandon US insistence on "zero enrichment" and instead pursue a deal that would impose severe, long-term limits on Iran's capacity to enrich and stockpile uranium in return for a gradual reduction of all US and multilateral nuclear-related sanctions.

At the time the Obama White House preferred to "keep the pressure on" by revving up sanctions. But by 2012 Iran had some 19,000 centrifuges—the majority of which had been built during the "Axis of Evil" administration of George W. Bush!⁶ President Obama's ensuing effort to secure a nuclear deal was impelled not so much by any kind of "Obama Doctrine,"⁷ but rather by the weak hand that Obama was dealt. Short of war, there was no alternative to a negotiated agreement.

Trump's 13 October 2017 speech effectively argues that those alternatives have reemerged—or had been obscured by—a very bad deal. Selectively citing from the text of the agreement, Trump asserted that one measure of the deal's shortcomings was that it was supposed to contribute to "regional and international peace and security."⁸ But the JCPOA was always exclusively focused on the nuclear issue: it was not meant to embrace the full range of Iran's actions in the Middle East or beyond. Had negotiators tried to link all of these issues, Iran would have quit the negotiations, leaving its centrifuges spinning, thus confronting the US with the same old bad choices: war or containment.

Trump also argued that the JCPOA was flawed because "in just a few years, as key restrictions disappear, Iran can sprint towards a rapid nuclear weapons breakout." But far from disappearing in "a few years," some of the agreement's most intrusive restrictions will remain for 10 to 25 years. Moreover, assuming—as the deal requires—that Iran signs the International Atomic Energy's Agency's (IAEA) "Additional Protocol" in 2023, its nuclear energy program will be subject *in*

perpetuity to many constraints. As Ali Vaez has noted, “to date, no country on earth has developed nuclear weapons under the watchful eyes of the IAEA’s inspectors who are empowered by the access that the Additional Protocol affords them.”⁹

Apart from his critique of the nuclear deal, Trump argues that Iran’s actions have “spread death, destruction and chaos all around the globe.” Whatever one’s judgment of these expansive assessments, Iran’s actions outside of the JCPOA provide no legal basis for abrogating the agreement. We may bemoan the fact that those who negotiated the JCPOA did not address Iran’s ballistic missile program.¹⁰ But scrapping a nuclear agreement that might make it almost impossible for Iran to accumulate enough enriched uranium for even one bomb would be a foolish step, particularly if the international community fails to forge a diplomatic solution to Iran’s ballistic missile program.

In making this observation, I am not minimizing the serious strategic challenges that Iran poses to the US and its friends in the region. But what precisely is the Trump administration’s strategy? Is it ready to muster the will, means and domestic political support to forge such a cogent approach, especially if it may require war with Iran? I do not see it, and the same can be said for many other well informed experts, some of which sit well to the right of the political spectrum.

Take Trump’s position on Syria. He rightly asserts that the “Iranian regime has supported the atrocities of Bashar al-Assad’s regime.” Tehran’s leaders believe that Assad’s survival is fundamental to Iran’s security and that the destruction of ISIS is a strategic imperative because from Iran’s perspective, Sunni jihadists pose a severe threat to the region and to Iran itself. In point of fact, the US shares many of Tehran’s assumptions. Thus in Syria, the US has made the destruction of ISIS its top priority: in this sense, the US and Iran are “objective” allies. As to the US position on Assad, by sin of commission or omission, the US has effectively endorsed Tehran’s position. When it comes to ISIS and Assad, the difference between the US and Iran is this: Iran has a coherent vision of its strategic interests and has used whatever means it deems necessary to advance them. By contrast, the US position has been mostly tactical and improvised. It has no cogent strategic vision of the future of Syria save the destruction of ISIS.

Then there is Yemen. I will not enter into the debate regarding the nature of Iranian support for the Houthis. But one thing is clear: Yemen’s 2013-14 National Dialogue produced an agreement drafted by a “Constitutional Drafting Committee” that excluded the Houthis.¹¹ The committee’s proposal for a “federal system” divided Yemen in a manner that was weighted against the Houthis. When the latter balked UN representative Jamal Benomar responded by inviting the Houthis to join a new round of talks. These talks made progress, opening up the possibility of a new power sharing arrangement with the Houthis. The Saudi response was to launch a bombing campaign that not only killed 1500 people but also led to the collapse of the talks. Benomar asserted—with much justification—that the actual purpose of the bombing was to kill the talks.¹² The Saudis then repaid the complement by pressuring the UN to dismiss him. Ever since, the Saudi military campaign has helped to create what UNICEF has called the “world’s worst humanitarian disaster.”¹³ There is much consternation in the US Congress on this issue but not much in the Trump administration.¹⁴

That the president condemns Iran for the “vicious civil wars in Syria and Yemen” is not surprising. What he fails to mention is that the US is ensnared in a diplomatic trap partly of its own making. A key part of this snare is Washington’s long-standing relationship with a country that has played a vanguard role in inspiring and funding jihadist movements and ideas. As one observer notes, “out of the 61 groups that are designated as terrorist organizations by the US State Department, the overwhelming majority are Wahhabi-inspired and Saudi-funded groups.”¹⁵ Thus, Trump’s cleverly worded claim that Iran “remains the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism” is open to serious dispute, particularly when we consider that non-state actors, such as Saudi religious charities, are closely linked to the Saudi state.

Of course, many of our key Middle East allies have pursued policies that are not always in the US

interest. This doesn't mean that we should ignore their concerns, much less walk away from our friends. But it does mean that the US must wrestle with how to manage these various tensions—and their legacies—rather than take the easy route by lashing out at the Iranians. Temper tantrums do not make for good strategic thinking.

The costs to US security interests that may flow from this return to such strategic incoherence are bound to accelerate. To revisit to the case of Yemen, consider a recent report by Jay Solomon. He notes that, “concerned about Tehran gaining the ability to choke off shipping lanes in the Red Sea,” the White House has expanded its support for Saudi Arabia’s military campaign in Yemen by providing precision-guided weapons.¹⁶ But as Solomon himself suggests:

Stepping up support for the Saudi coalition is also tricky. US and Arab officials acknowledge that only a political solution can end the war. Although greater American involvement could pressure the Houthis to embrace diplomacy, it might also lessen Riyadh’s desire for a halt to military operations, particularly if it begins seeing major advances.

Tricky indeed. Proxy-war escalation cuts both ways, and as the lesson of Vietnam and other cases suggests, it could create a self-fulfilling prophecy by, in this case, giving Iran more incentive to expand its support of the Houthis. The humanitarian disaster in Yemen will continue with the possibility of millions of lives imperiled and no end to the conflict.

The US decision to expand military support for Saudi Arabia’s role in Yemen is at least animated by some kind of strategic rationale. By comparison, and as I have noted, US policy in Syria lacks strategic coherence. The possibility of armed conflict between the US and Iran could ensue from this policy vacuum. But such an outcome is probably of little concern to those who are now pushing to kill the nuclear agreement, whether in one fell swoop or through the pretext of “nix or fix.” What they seek is what they always wanted: military action. The leaders of Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia were the chief advocates of such action. Their view was shared by some US policy makers, diplomats, and strategic thinkers, some of whom are now back in the lime light. Among them is the former US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton. Although in 2015 he again called for bombing Iran, in the past few months Bolton has not mentioned the words “bombing” or “war.” But at least had the relative integrity not to indulge the fiction of “fixing” the JCPOA. Instead he has called for its total “repeal.”¹⁷

It may well be that war with Iran is not the outcome that Trump administration wants. But as Philip Gordon has noted, the growing media campaign against the nuclear agreement is creating a war drumbeat not unlike that which led to the 2003 US Iraq invasion.¹⁸ This is all the more reason to recognize the dangers that could ensue from an anger-driven, a-strategic Iran policy.

These dangers also apply to Iran’s own domestic political arena. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, foreign and domestic politics are tightly interwoven. This was amply demonstrated by the reaction of hardline forces to the nuclear agreement: they saw the efforts of President Hasan Rouhani and his allies to secure the deal as a bid to back away from the policy of “resistance” and pursue instead a policy of wider diplomatic and especially economic engagement with the global community. They also saw it as portending a concerted bid by a new alliance of reformist politicians and pragmatic conservatives to pry open a political arena that had been tightly closed under former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Thus, the hardline backlash is not so much against the agreement but against Rouhani and his allies. As Farideh Farhi and I have noted in the introduction to our co-edited volume, *Power and Political Change in Iran*, prospects for political change in Iran depend in part on easing the country’s long-standing regional and global conflicts, particularly with the US.¹⁹ This is one reason why Iranian opponents of political and economic liberalization view any kind of *rapprochement* with the US as a near existential threat: their own domestic clout depends on sustaining conflict with the “Great Satan.”

By itself, this fact does not mean that the US should always avoid conflict with Iran or, alternatively, assume that engagement will magically and quickly transform Iran's domestic scene. But we must recognize that a policy that leads to military confrontation will only reward hardliners. President Trump has declared that "the regime violently suppresses its own citizens." But he does not understand that his effort to sabotage the JCPOA is undercutting those forces trying to foster political detente and decompression in Iran. In the coming few years their struggle will intensify, particularly when the crucial question of who will succeed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as *Rahbar* gathers steam. The last thing Iran's reformists want, or need, is another "Axis of Evil" US policy, one that could produce a proxy or direct US-Iran war at a pivotal period in the evolution of Islamic Republic.

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Notes:

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The Trajectory of the Iranian Military

by Alex Vatanka

There can be no doubt that despite much speculation about Washington’s long-term intentions, the United States remains the most powerful political-military actor in the Middle East. In that context, the most powerful adversary of the US in the region is the Islamic Republic of Iran. A self-declared enemy of the US, the hardliners inside the Iranian regime are busy weighing their options as they seek to maximize their influence in the Middle East and beyond. This Iranian pursuit of power is occurring on different levels and involves different Iranian regime actors. However, there can be no doubt that one of the most significant actors—if not the most significant—is the Iranian military and specifically the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC).

The debate about the Iranian military

In the United States, after 16 years of ongoing military operations in the Middle East, American military planners are confronted with a simple but powerful reality: that US national security interests will force Washington to remain engaged in Middle Eastern affairs in the foreseeable future. On an operational level, military engagement against anti-American forces will continue to be required in some of the most sensitive spots in the region, including in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

In this context, the US is not confronting a single conventional military power (as, for example, with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq). Instead, the US is faced with the prospects of cases of “hybrid war,” which is basically a combination of conventional military assets, terrorist/militia operations, and cyber warfare and disinformation media campaigns.¹ And here, among America’s foes, the Iranian threat is unique.² The Iranians know full well that in terms of conventional military capabilities they are woefully behind not just the United States but also other US allies such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates. Most notably, Iran’s Air Force and Naval capabilities are no match for its adversaries. In fact, one can argue that Iran really has only two key military assets: its “asymmetric war fighting” and its growing missile arsenal. Nonetheless, military planners in Tehran are known to exploit an array of military tools to bolster Iran’s ability to project power.

The motivations behind Iran’s emphasis on “asymmetric” capabilities were initially out of

necessity. However, this type of military *modus operandi* has since 2011 gained additional significance for Tehran thanks to opportunities that have emerged on the regional scene. After Iran's revolution of 1979, when the United States ceased to be Iran's principal supplier of military hardware, training, and advice, the regime in Tehran had no choice but to improvise as it looked to address its military deficiencies.

Two of Iran's present-day military strengths—its use of foreign proxy groups and its development of a missile arsenal—emerged as policy priorities in the immediate period after the 1979 revolution and intensified during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The onset of the Arab revolts from 2011 combined with the emergence of ISIS in 2014 has since given Iran ample opportunities to look for ways to further intervene militarily outside of its borders, which it has pursued with notable (but also controversial) intensity.

Nonetheless, the question is whether these latest Iranian military interventions in the region amount to a new offensive “military doctrine” as such or if they are merely a reflection of Iranian opportunism in the face of power vacuums created in a number of states due to local upheavals resulting from popular Arab revolts.³ This question cannot at the moment be conclusively answered given the lack of data, but there can be little doubt that available empirical evidence does suggest the Iranians are evaluating a broad range of military policy options for the future.

At the same time, it is important not to assume that a full consensus exists in Tehran on the question of the country's military posture. The Iranian regime is deliberately set up in a way to pit various state organs against each other as, for example, the IRGC against the Artesh (regular armed forces) or the President and his government against the Office of the Supreme Leader. However, while this division of labor together with intra-regime rivalry for power makes it hard to predict Tehran's next military moves, certain recent developments point to an IRGC-led effort toward establishing a more agile offensive doctrine.

The “asymmetric doctrine”

There is no doubt that the Iranians have concluded that US military officials—such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis—have in the Trump administration an unprecedented amount of influence in the foreign policy decision-making process (particularly on questions relating to the Middle East) and, therefore, should not be overly provoked. For example, as soon as Trump entered the White House, the US military reported a reduction in the IRGC Navy's harassment of American ships in the Persian Gulf.

The Iranian regime likes to show itself as a martyrdom-seeking state. But in reality, Iran's military strategy remains mostly very cautious. For example, in the case of Syria, Tehran has been extremely careful in the numbers of troops it has been willing to deploy to the battlefields.⁴ In fact, since the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, Tehran's military strategy has been overwhelmingly about avoiding a head-on conventional military collision with its key international and regional adversaries such as the United States.

However, as IRGC commanders are keen to repeat, the shifting regional security environment requires for Iran's military strategy to adapt and to reinvent itself. In Tehran, this is often referred to as “forward defense” and the idea that Iran should battle its opponents outside its borders to prevent conflict from taking place on Iranian soil.⁵

This kind of military restitution necessitates plenty of readjustments, including the conversion of some of the existing regular military units from regular conventional army ground troops to smaller, more agile units that can operate as commandos/light infantry forces in war zones such as the Syria or Iraq. Meanwhile, it is in the Artesh where the Iranians have most potential for a transformation.

The Artesh is in terms of size (about 350,000) approximately three times bigger than the IRGC (about 120,000). Artesh units are mostly organized in heavy armored, infantry, and mechanized units, which are distinctly a legacy of defense planning from the days of the Shah when the United States helped Iran plan for major conventional ground battles against the likes of the Soviet Union and Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Today, there is almost no prospect for such ground-based military battles between Iran and its closest adversaries. As is currently evident, Iran's two most intense regional rivalries with Saudi Arabia and Israel are overwhelmingly both happening via proxy actions and not through direct conventional military confrontation.

Accordingly, some military planners in Tehran appear to consider the Artesh's present capabilities as being a mismatch and inappropriate for Iran's foreign policy ambitions in the region in places such as Syria. By converting some of the Artesh manpower for so-called "forward operations," the battle-hardened IRGC military units can be made more readily available for domestic security operations inside the Islamic Republic should circumstances require it, for example, if a 2009-type of Green opposition movement should rise up again requiring suppression. In other words, if Iran opts for a major military makeover, it is within the Artesh where it will find most flexibility and space for change and reform.

However, while the concept of "forward defense" on a large military scale is somewhat a new idea, the use of asymmetric tactics is as old as the Islamic Republic. In order to overcome its conventional military weakness following the cut in US military supplies to Iran in 1980 and given Tehran's limited financial capacity to engage in major military procurement, the Iranians have for some nearly 40 years relied disproportionately on low-cost deterrence to protect the homeland.

This process began in the 1980s during the war with Iraq. It was at this time that the Iranians began to focus on and develop asymmetric capabilities, including the formation of Iraqi (and later Afghan) proxies and short, medium, and long-range missiles as well as the conduct of mining and other anti-access and area-denial operations in the Persian Gulf.

Iran's latest declarations of a new "forward defense" strategy is in fact only an extension of a process that has been in motion for many years. The major difference as compared to before is that Iran now can launch such asymmetric efforts on a scale unseen before thanks to the power vacuum found in so many conflict arenas in the broader Middle East. Iranian operations in Iraq and Syria since 2012 and 2014 respectively are the best examples of this new reality.

Transforming its military

In terms of specific signals that might substantiate such reform of the Iranian military doctrine, one could point to the April 2017 statement by Brigadier General Kiumars Heydari, the head of the Ground Forces of the Artesh. Heydari said that some of the units under his command are to be transformed into "offensive" forces that can be deployed frontally outside of Iran's borders.⁶ The exact motivation behind the statement is unclear, but two facts are not in dispute. First, Heydari is a former IRGC commander who Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appointed to the Artesh command role only in November 2016. Second, there are plenty of indications that the historic rivalry between the Artesh and IRGC is still ongoing. The deployment of "offensive" forces is traditionally the IRGC's area of operations and not of the Artesh. If Heydari's declaration proves to be true, then the implication is that the IRGC is shaping the Artesh in its own image. This is an important unfolding reorganization.

This potential transformation represents a major development, but it is not a surprise as such.⁷

Tehran's regional military posture and operations are overwhelmingly shaped by the IRGC, and it has a clear preference for the use of proxies, which both is relatively inexpensive for Iran and provides considerable scope for deniability for the IRGC and its controversial actions. In fact, someone as central in Iran's regional military planning as Major General Qasem Soleimani (head of Iran's Qods Force) knows best how to wage warfare via militants Iran controls.

A vivid example of this was the IRGC's operations against the US military in Iraq from 2003 to 2010. While the US clearly detected the hand of the IRGC, the fact that the Iranians relied on Iraqi proxy groups for the attacks on the US provided Iran with enough deniability that Iran was able to avoid a direct US response. Limiting the IRGC's scope of deniability must be a key goal for any adversary of the IRGC.

This modus operandi means that Iran relies heavily on Arab proxies. On one hand, this is relatively low-cost and gives Tehran deniability, but it is a double-edged sword. On the other hand, the IRGC already has vast experience with forming proxies that look to it for ideological guidance and military-financial support. The list includes groups such as Lebanese Hizbollah, the Iraqi Badr Corps or Asaib Ahl Al-Haq, various Afghan groups, and to some extent even the Yemeni Houthis. And Iran can be expected to continue to work along these lines based on a tested formula. The IRGC will look for a security vacuum in the region and will fill it to the extent that it can. Also it will not push its luck by being too dogmatic in steering the proxies it selects and will work with what it has at hand.

And yet, the IRGC faces the danger of over-reliance on proxies as there is always an inherent danger in such groups acting unilaterally or even against Tehran's wishes. The cases of Hizbollah's 2006 war with Israel (which Iran had initially opposed) and the 2011 decision by Hamas to abandon Bashar al-Assad are two good examples of Tehran's being wrong-footed by proxy allies.

While the Iranians clearly demonstrate strategic patience in many of their regional military operations, there is always an inherent danger of overreach by doing too much too fast thanks to the multiple fronts that have opened up in the Middle East since 2011. And the IRGC leadership recognizes that the organization's Achilles Heel is the perceptions among the Iranian population that its adventurist actions are costing the nation dearly or risking severe retaliation. Its nervousness on this front was evident in late April 2017 when a number of public figures in Iran criticized Iran's Syria policy. Ali Saeedi, the Supreme Leader's personal representative in the IRGC, was forced to portray the organization as the first-line of defense of the Iranian nation.⁸ The incident clearly demonstrated the IRGC's anxiety about a backlash among Iranians, and this factor will also shape its future calculations.

Meanwhile, despite the lack of data, what is certain is that the IRGC has been experimenting with various new ways of warfare for some time and that the latest statements about a potential reorganization of the Artesh Ground Forces has to be seen in the context of this evolving thinking. What is beyond doubt is that the use of local proxies will continue to be the preferred modus operandi of the IRGC in the arenas of conflict where it is militarily involved. Accordingly, major Iranian rearmament of its conventional forces, a costly proposition, is improbable in the foreseeable future.

Finally, it is imperative that Tehran's effort in the realm of military planning is not judged against military objectives only. Its asymmetric warfare capacities clearly do act as a deterrence against Iran's rivals—as most vividly demonstrated by the hesitation they have generated inside the Pentagon about what to do with the Iranian threat. But Tehran's cultivation of Arab proxies is also a way of creating political leverage inside state institutions in targeted countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. These proxies have a proven record to eventually become mouthpieces for Iran's broader ideological agenda, and the implications of such political propagation will last much longer than Iran's military agenda.

The standard international assessment of the present Iranian military doctrine is that it is still inherently defensive. However, there is at the same time a broad recognition that Tehran continues to decentralize its military command. This is both to enhance its pursuit of “hybrid warfare” and, above all, to strengthen Iran’s flexibility to conduct asymmetric operations, as a result of Iran’s recognition of the superiority of the conventional forces of its key adversaries, most notably the United States.

The fact that the Pentagon was extremely successful in quickly disabling and destroying the command-and-control centers of its adversaries (particularly in Iraq and Libya) in recent conflicts is a reality that has been carefully noted by the Iranian military planners. Accordingly, the command-and-control in Iran is divided along 31 units based on the number of provinces in the country.

But the Iranians do not appear to anticipate a conventional war with the United States in the foreseeable future. Instead, and as has been pointed out above, at least the IRGC leadership appears to seriously experiment with the idea of a new “forward defense” that will enable Iran to maximize the advantages of asymmetric warfare. It includes the use of rapid deployment of militias in conflict zones (such as by pro-Iran groups within Iraq’s Hashd Shaabi movement or Syria’s National Defense Forces) and combined guerilla tactics with massive information/media campaigns against Iran’s rivals.

Whether the IRGC can continue to succeed in such efforts depends largely on the following two factors: the willingness of Arab client groups to continue to be subservient to the IRGC agenda and the tolerance of the Iranian public to see the IRGC continue its military adventurism in the region despite the risks it brings.

In other words, the use of asymmetric warfare does not mean that Iran will not make use of its missiles or other conventional military capabilities, but rather that alongside taking advantage of them, the use of asymmetric warfare tactics is also considered an advantage for the Islamic Republic, and it can increase defensive and offensive capabilities against rivals such as the United States.

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Notes:

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MES Hosted Events

2016

- 7 Mar: MES hosted Amb. Husain Haqqani, Hudson Institute, as part of the 2015-16 Lecture Series “A Survey and Analysis of the Armed Forces and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)” for a presentation entitled “Pakistan Between Mosque and Military”.
- 14 Apr: MES hosted Mr. Hamid Lellou, MCU Center for Advanced Operational and Cultural Learning (CAOCL), as part of the 2015-16 Lecture Series “A Survey and Analysis of the Armed Forces and Civil-Military Relations in the MENA” for a presentation entitled “People’s National Army (ANP) and its Acolytes: Civil-Military Relations in Algeria”.
- 6 May: MES hosted a panel discussion entitled “Turkey and the Regional Turmoil,” featuring BG Yavuz Celik, (TuRAF), Defense and Air Attache, Embassy of the Republic of Turkey; Dr. Sinan Ciddi, Georgetown University; and Dr. Ahmet K. Han, Kadir Has University, as part of 2015-16 Lecture Series “A Survey and Analysis of the Armed Forces and Civil-Military Relations in the MENA” and the Marine Corps War College’s (MCWAR) Diplomacy and Statecraft Course.
- 29 Aug: MES hosted a roundtable discussion with Dr. Edward Erickson, MCU Command and Staff College (CSC), entitled “The Coup and the Turkish Military”.
- 20 Oct: MES hosted Dr. Christopher Young, MCU, as part of the 2016-17 Lecture Series “Great Power Competition in the MENA Today” for a presentation entitled “China in the Middle East: A ‘New Great Game’ or ‘Strategic Necessity’?”.
- 7 Nov: MES hosted Dr. Brandon Valeriano, MCU, as part of the 2016-17 Lecture Series “Great Power Competition in the MENA Today” for a presentation entitled “Russia in Syria: Doubling Down on Failure”.

2017

- 10 Jan: MES hosted a panel discussion entitled “Continuity, Change, and the Islamic Republic,” featuring Dr. Hussein Banai, Indiana University; Mr. Alex Vatanka, Middle East Institute; and Dr. Amin Tarzi, MCU, as part of 2016-17 Lecture Series “Great Power Competition in the MENA Today” and the MCWAR Diplomacy and Statecraft Course.
- 10 Feb: MES hosted Prof. Sumit Ganguly, Indiana University, as part of the 2016-17 Lecture Series “Great Power Competition in the MENA Today” for a presentation entitled “Untangling the Indo-Pakistan Tussle Over Afghanistan”.
- 28 Mar: MES hosted a Pakistan Military delegation visiting MCU for a Counterinsurgency (COIN) Lessons Learned brief.
- 30 Mar: MES hosted Mr. Derek Chollet, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, as part of the 2016-17 Lecture Series “Great Power Competition in the MENA Today” for a presentation entitled “What the Middle East Meltdown Means for the Transatlantic Relationship”.
- 17 Apr: MES hosted a panel discussion entitled “Turkey: Back to the Future,” featuring Amb. James Jeffrey, The Washington Institute; Dr. Sinan Ciddi, Georgetown University; and Ms. Amberin Zaman, Al-Monitor, as part of 2016-17 Lecture Series “Great Power Competition in the MENA Today” and the MCWAR Diplomacy and Statecraft Course.
- 24 Apr: MES hosted Ms. Amanda Kadlec, RAND Corporation, as part of the 2016-17 Lecture Series “Great Power Competition in the MENA Today” and in support of the MCU Strategy and Policy Course (SPC) for a presentation entitled “Who and What Matters in the Libya Conflict and Possible U.S. Responses”.
- 2 Oct: MES hosted a panel discussion featuring Dr. Jeffrey Nadaner, MCU, and Dr. Amin Tarzi, MCU, for a panel discussion entitled “Israel’s Security Outlook and Geopolitical Competition in the MENA Region, as part of the 2017-18 Lecture Series “Navigating Geopolitical Competition and Internal Wars in the MENA”.
- 2 Nov: MES hosted a panel discussion entitled “Dealing and Dueling with Iran,” featuring Dr. Daniel Brumberg, Georgetown University; Michael Eisenstadt, The Middle East Institute; and Dr. Amin Tarzi, MCU, as part of 2017-18 Lecture Series “Navigating Geopolitical Competition and Internal Wars in the MENA” and the MCWAR Diplomacy and Statecraft Course.

MES PME Support

2016

- 21 Jan: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture “Post Nuclear Deal Threat Perception and External Strategies of the Islamic Republic of Iran” to the Senior Enlisted Professional Military Education (SEPME) Course, MCU.
- 23 Feb: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “Overview of ISIL and Assessments of Turkish Iranian, Saudi, US and Russian Strategies” to the Naval Education and Training Security Assistance Field Activity International Training Center (NITC) International Anti-Terrorism/Anti-Piracy Class, Naval Air Station, Pensacola, FL.
- 25 Feb: Adam Seitz, presented a lecture entitled “Yemeni Armed Forces and the Ties that Bind and Divide” as part of the 2015-16 Lecture Series “A Survey and Analysis of the Armed Forces and Civil-Military Relations in the MENA”.
- 18 Mar: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “Post Nuclear Deal Threat Perception and External Strategies of the Islamic Republic of Iran” to the Strategy and Policy Course (SPC), MCU.
- 6 Apr: Amin Tarzi and Adam Seitz supported Command and Staff College (CSC) Conference Group 5 (CG5) Practical Applications 9215, MCU.
- 7 Apr: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “Political Culture and External Strategies of Iran Post Nuclear Deal” to the SEPME Course, MCU.
- 28 Apr: Amin Tarzi taught the Marine Corps War College (MCWAR) Diplomacy and Statecraft Course entitled “The Arab-Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”, MCU.
- 11 May: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture on the war in Afghanistan to the School of Advanced Warfighting (SAW), MCU.
- 19 - 22 May: Amin Tarzi participated in discussions with Georgian military and civilian leaders, EU Monitoring Mission, and NATO-Georgian Joint Training and Evaluation Center (JTEC), and arranged a MCWAR discussion with Eka Tkeshelashvili, head of Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies, Tbilisi, Georgia.
- 25 May: Adam Seitz presented a lecture entitled “US Grand Strategy and the Yemen Quagmire” to visiting Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC) fellows, MCU.

- 26-28 May: Amin Tarzi participated in discussions and interactions with senior Turkish military officers and PME students while attending the Turkish War Colleges' "International Relations and Security Symposium" in Istanbul, Turkey.
- 2 Jun: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Political Culture and External Strategies of Iran Post Nuclear Deal" to the SEPME Course, MCU.
- 15 Jun: Amin Tarzi presented lectures on countering ISIL and Iran's internal and external strategies to a Marine Corps Reserve annual training session, MCU.
- 12 Jul: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Political Culture and External Strategies of Iran Post Nuclear Deal" to the Reserve Senior Staff Course (RSSC), MCU.
- 18 Jul: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Overview of the Origins and Strategies to Counter ISIL" to the RSSC, MCU.

2017

- 18 Jan: Amin Tarzi taught the MCWAR Diplomacy and Statecraft Course entitled "ISIL-Present and Future Challenges", MCU.
- 19 Jan: Amin Tarzi taught the MCWAR Diplomacy and Statecraft Course entitled "Israel's Security and the Balance of Power in the Middle East", MCU.
- 24 Jan: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Examining Iran's Political Culture and External Strategies and the Trump Era" to the SEPME Course, MCU.
- 14 Mar: Amin Tarzi presented a pre-deployment lectures on Afghanistan to Marines of Task Force South West (TF-SW), Camp Lejeune, NC.
- 29 Mar: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Examining Iran's Political Culture and External Strategies and the Trump Era" to the SEPME Course, MCU.
- 1 May: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Examining Iran's Political Culture and External Strategies and the Trump Era" to the SPC, MCU.
- 18 May: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "The Longest War: Afghanistan ISAF/OEF to RS/OFS" to the SAW, MCU.
- 7 Jun: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Examining Iran's Political Culture and External Strategies and the Trump Era" to the SEPME Course, MCU.

- 18 Jul: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “Iran’s Political Culture and External Strategies Two Years after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)” to the RSSC, MCU.
- 19 Jul: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “Changemakers and Change in the ‘Middle East’” to the RSSC, MCU.
- 20 Jul: Adam Seitz presented two breakout session lectures entitled “Yemen and the Challenges of Operating in the Gray Zone” at the MCU Faculty Development Conference, MCU.
- 30 Aug: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “Iran’s Political Culture and Threat Perception” to the SEPME Course, MCU.
- 7 Sep: Amin Tarzi presented an overview lecture on Iran to the Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS), MCU.
- 21 Sep: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “The Longest War: Afghanistan ISAF/OEF to RS/OFS” to the SEPME Course, MCU.
- 28 Sep: Adam Seitz led a discussion entitled “Houthi Expansionism, Internal War, Geopolitics, and the Yemen Quagmire” for the Small Wars Discussion Group, Combat Development and Integration (CD&I) Operations Analysis Division (OAD), Marine Corps Combat Development Command (MCCDC).
- 10 Oct: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “The Security Environment in Afghanistan and Pakistan” to the NATO Regional Cooperation Course 18 (NRCC18) at the NATO Defense College (NDC), Rome, Italy.
- 18 Oct: Amin Tarzi participated in a panel discussion entitled “The International Dimensions of Defense Policy: Allies and Adversaries—Middle East” at the 59th Academy Assembly, US Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, CO.
- 19 Oct: Amin Tarzi lectured on Iran at the “Politics of the Middle East” class, US Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, CO.
- 19 Oct: Amin Tarzi lectured on Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns at the “Strategic Studies” class, US Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, CO.
- 26 Oct: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “Iran’s Political Culture and Threat Perception after JCPOA” to the SEPME Course, MCU.

MES Outreach

2016

- 18 Feb: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture on Iran as part of the National Security Lecture Series, University Mary Washington (UMW), Dahlgren Campus, VA.
- 16 Mar: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture on Iran in support of the Marine Corps University Foundation (MCUF) in Hope Sound, FL.
- 30 Mar: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture on ISIL to SES Government Solutions in Reston, VA.
- 30 Mar: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture on ISIL at UMW, Fredericksburg, VA.
- 1 Apr: Adam Seitz presented a lecture entitled “US Grand Strategy and the Yemen Quagmire” to visiting Marshall Fellows at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, Quantico, VA.
- 6 May: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture and led a discussion on Afghanistan at a National Intelligence Council Roundtable hosted by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), VA.
- 26 May: Amin Tarzi presented a paper on counterterrorism at the Turkish War Colleges’ “International Relations and Security Symposium” in Istanbul, Turkey.
- 26 May: Amin Tarzi presented and led a closed-door discussion on counterterrorism to select students and faculty at the Turkish Joint Command and Staff College, Istanbul, Turkey.
- 22-25 Jun: Amin Tarzi presented lectures on ISIL and US reactions to Brexit, and engaged in individual and small group discussions with young professionals from the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean regions, at the 6th International Neighborhood Symposium, Yesilkoy, Turkey.
- 13 Jul: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “Origins and Aims of ISIL and Strategies to Counter It” to the Thomson Reuters Special Services in Mclean, VA.
- 25 Jul: Amin Tarzi gave a talk on counterterrorism for E.K. Fox & Associates, Ltd. in Chantilly, VA.
- 24-28 Oct: Adam Seitz participated in the Gray Zone MENA Simulation “Examinations of Saudi-Iranian Gray Zone Competition in MENA, and of Potential Outcomes of the Flow of Foreign Fighters to the United States” hosted by the ICONS project at the University of Maryland College Park.

- 17-20 Nov: Amin Tarzi and Adam Seitz attended the 50th Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Associations (MESA) in Boston, MA. Amin Tarzi presented his paper entitled "The Relationship Between Fayz Muhammad and Mahmud Tarzi", as part of the panel "Assessing the Legacy of Fayz Muhammad "Katib-i Hazarah". Adam Seitz presented his paper entitled "Strategic Implications of Huthi Expansionism, Perpetual Insecurity and Internal War in Yemen", as part of the panel "Yemen: From Zaydi Revivalism to Huthi Expansionism" sponsored by the American Institute of Yemeni Studies (AIYS).

2017

- 3-7 Apr: Adam Seitz participated in the conference "Addressing Security Sector Reform (SSR) in Yemen" co-hosted by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) and the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) and presented a paper entitled "The Tribal-Military-Commercial Complex and the Challenges to Security Sector Reform in Yemen", Dead Sea, Jordan.
- 23 May: Amin Tarzi participated at a National Intelligence Council conference on Afghanistan at the US Army War College and presented a paper on Iran's interests and involvement in Afghanistan.
- 12-18 Jun: Amin Tarzi presented a paper entitled "Middle East Changemakers and Changes in Historical, Theoretical, and Strategic Contexts", and engaged in individual and small group discussions with young professionals from the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean regions, at the 7th International Neighborhood Symposium, Odessa, Ukraine.
- 20 Jun-13 Jul: Amin Tarzi participated in the Summer Institute for Israel Studies (SIIS) program supported by the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University. The SIIS program involved intensive study at Brandeis University and a trip to Israel.
- 9 Nov: Amin Tarzi lectured on the PLO and Hamas—Secular and Islamist Politics at the "Modern Israel and the Middle East" class, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV.
- 9 Nov: Amin Tarzi presented a public lecture entitled "Continuity, Change, and the Iran Nuclear Deal" at West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV.
- 10 Nov: Amin Tarzi lectured on US Marine Corps changing mission since in World War II at the "Modern Military History" class, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV.
- 17 Nov: Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Regional States' Reactions and Responses to the US South Asia Strategy" at the US Department of State Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Washington, DC.

Outside Publications by MES Scholars

2016

- Feb: Amin Tarzi, “Taliban in Afghanistan” in the *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, edited by Richard C. Martin (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2016).
- Mar: Amin Tarzi, “İran’ın Nükleer Anlaşması ve Obama Doktrini” in *Analist* (Ankara: USAK, March 2016).
- Mar: Amin Tarzi, “Iran’s Nuclear Deal and the ‘Obama Doctrine’”, *Eurasia Review* (16 March 2016).
- Apr: Adam Seitz, “Patronage Politics in Transition: Challenges to the Political and Economic Interests of the Yemeni Armed Forces”, in *Businessmen in Arms: How the Military and Other Armed Groups Profit in the MENA Region*, edited by Elke Grawert and Zeinab Abul-Magd (Roman and Littlefield, 2016).

2017

- Jun: Amin Tarzi, “Iran, Russia, and the Taliban: Reassessing the Future of the Afghan State”, in Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) Notes, 14 June 2017, <<https://www.fpri.org>>.
- Dec: Adam Seitz, “The Tribal-Military-Commercial Complex and the Challenges to Security Sector Reform in Yemen” in *Addressing Security Sector Reform in Yemen. Challenges and Opportunities for Intervention During and Post-conflict*, edited by Marie-Christine Heinze (Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient in cooperation with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, December 2017).

MES Scholars

Amin Tarzi is the Director of Middle East Studies (MES) at the Marine Corps University (MCU) in Quantico, Virginia. Dr. Tarzi established MES in 2007 and provides MES strategic vision, management, and personnel oversight. Annually, he establishes MES's goals, objectives, and associated budget requirements, determines MES's program initiatives and emphasis, and oversees programmatic assessment activities. He supervises and mentors MCU International Fellows, external interns, and Marines assigned to MES, integrating them into the work of MES and showcasing their contributions. Beyond his administrative responsibilities, Dr. Tarzi supports MCU by providing a resident scholar with expertise on the Greater Middle East, to include parts of South and Central Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea regions. Dr. Tarzi teaches an elective on Israel at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College and mentors and advises students on their master theses and career trajectory. He also teaches classes as part of Diplomacy and Statecraft course at the Marine Corps War College and at other Marine Corps and sister service professional military education programs, including on board U.S. Navy vessels, and represents the Marine Corps at various U.S. and international academic and professional forums, presenting papers or conducting classes. Dr. Tarzi has lectured across the United States and in over 30 countries, and his work appears in both policy and academic presses. He is a Senior Fellow in the Program on the Middle East at the Foreign Policy Research Institute and an Adjunct Professor of Practice at the University of Southern California's Dornsife Washington, DC Program. His previous experience includes the position of Senior Research Associate for the Middle East at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, the post of Political Advisor to the Saudi Arabian Mission to the United Nations, and Analyst on Iranian affairs at the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research in Abu Dhabi. Dr. Tarzi has a PhD and a MA degree from the Department of Middle East Studies at New York University and a BA in philosophy and political science from Queens College in New York City.

Adam C. Seitz is the senior research associate and instructor for Middle East Studies (MES) at the Marine Corps University (MCU), where his research focuses on the civil-military relations, the security sector, the role of armed non-state actors, and conflict studies in Yemen, Iran, the Red Sea and Gulf regions. In this position Mr. Seitz supports MCU as a resident scholar with expertise in Middle East security and conflict studies, representing the Marine Corps at various academic and professional forums, and providing subject matter expert support and advice to Professional Military Education programs. Prior to joining MCU in 2009, Mr. Seitz was a research associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy where his research focus was in Middle East and South Asia security studies, weapons of mass destruction, weapons proliferation, terrorism and asymmetric warfare. His research at CSIS culminated with the publication of *Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Birth of a Regional Nuclear Arms Race?* (Praeger Security International, 2009), co-authored with Anthony H. Cordesman. Mr. Seitz served in the U.S. Army as an intelligence analyst and is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Mr. Seitz earned his BA in International Affairs from the University of Colorado at Boulder and his MA in International Relations and Conflict Resolution from American Military University. His latest works include "Ties That Bind and Divide: The 'Arab Spring' and Yemeni Civil-Military Relations" in *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition* (Saqi Books, 2014), "Patronage Politics in Transition: Political and Economic Interests of the Yemeni Armed Forces" in *Businessmen in Arms: How the Military and Other Armed Groups Profit in the MENA Region* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), and "The Tribal-Military-Commercial Complex and the Challenges to Security Sector Reform in Yemen" in *Addressing Security Sector Reform in Yemen: Challenges and Opportunities for Intervention during and post-Conflict* (CARPO, 2017).

The Jihadist Maritime Strategy: Waging a Guerrilla War at Sea, Norman Cigar, MES Monographs No. 8, MES at MCU, May 2017.

Middle East Studies In Review: 2014-2015, MES at MCU, April 2016.

MES Insights, Volume 7, Issues 1-6, 2016.

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Middle East Studies

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