

# The Emergence of the Sunni Axis in the Middle East

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Much focus in the Middle East in recent years has centered on the growing influence of Iran and the creation of a sphere of influence under its leadership stretching from Iran to Iraq, Syria, and Hizbollah in Lebanon. Terms such as “radical axis,” “Shiite Crescent,” and “resistance camp,” which were designed to reflect this alliance, whether by emphasizing the political-strategic element or the ideological-sectarian element, have become part of the general lexicon. The upheavals that have gripped the Arab world since late 2010, however, have led to the formation of a new geopolitical landscape, with changes in the composition and cohesion of the radical axis. They have also sparked the formation of an Arab-Turkish/monarchial-republican Sunni axis, which constitutes a counterweight to Iran, and is challenging the power and influence of Iran and its proxies in the region. This increased Sunni activism began even before the so-called Arab Spring, which aggravated the sectarian tension between Sunnis and Shiites and between the Arabs and Iran, but peaked in the wake of the events. Classic balance of power considerations and inter-ethnic rivalries are intertwined in this activism, particularly on the part of the Arab Gulf states, whose goal is to form a Sunni front and obstruct Iran.

The Sunni perception of the Iranian threat stems from sectarian enmity and anxiety about Iran’s rising influence in the region – a concern that grew with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the assumption of a leading role by the Shiite majority in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Iran also tried to take credit for key developments such as the Israeli withdrawal from the security zone in Lebanon in 2000 and the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005.<sup>2</sup> In addition, there is the fear that future Iranian nuclear

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weapons capability will result in a profound geostrategic change in the Middle East, followed by the strengthening of the Iranian-led axis and the increasing sense of empowerment among its members. The radical axis plays a key role in Iran's security perception, and Iran serves as material and ideological strategic depth for its fellow axis members. Iran has an interest in portraying itself as a leader of the radical forces in order to enhance the sense of its power, and it regards the other members of the axis as a means of promoting its regional ambitions. However, the weakening of the Assad regime, the distancing of Hamas from the radical axis following the outbreak of civil war in Syria, and internal Lebanese restrictions on Hizbollah have made this axis less attractive and significantly weakened it. Its cohesion naturally also depends on the behavior of external actors that are able to affect the priorities of the axis members.

Against the background of an apparent weakening of the Iran-led axis, this article examines what presents as the emerging Sunni camp, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of this axis. Indeed, the weakness of the Arab regimes, particularly Egypt, the historical distrust between Turkey and the Arab countries, and the disunity and lack of a clear and unified strategy among the members of this axis impact negatively on the potential new power equations created by the Arab Spring. Beyond these issues, the question of what interests are common to the members of the Sunni axis and the US and Israel will also be considered: ostensibly, the axis and Israel and the West share some interests, at least in the short term. Yet while these regimes are considered pro-Western and more moderate toward Israel than Iran, they still largely represent and support an Islamic ideology, which in its extreme version vigorously opposes Israel. Finally, many believe that the strengthening of the Sunni axis is primarily due to the weakening of the Shiite axis, reflecting a zero-sum game. From this perspective, if it becomes clear that the weakening of the Shiite axis is temporary or partial, this will affect the strength of the opposing axis.

### **Is There a Sunni Alliance?**

Iran's advancements in the nuclear sphere and the regional instability have caused significant movement among the Sunni countries and strengthened the realization that a more active policy is needed. Greater political and security cooperation between Turkey, Egypt, and the

Arab Gulf states, headed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, is perceived as increasingly urgent, especially given the Iranian threat and the Syrian civil war. More coordination on the strategy toward Iran on the part of some of these states and a more publicly assertive stance is already evident, and this positioning has invigorated the Sunni axis.

While the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) supported the no-fly zone over Libya, thereby paving the way to a Security Council resolution on the issue and the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime, Saudi Arabia regarded Mubarak's overthrow as a painful loss and an American betrayal of a loyal partner.<sup>3</sup> Following the fall of the Mubarak regime, Saudi Arabia responded firmly to the uprising in Bahrain, and in March 2011 sent forces (under the GCC flag) to put down the riots. The purpose was to deliver a message that Saudi Arabia would be willing to employ all available means – from diplomacy and economics to military measures – in its efforts to act as a counterweight against Iran (and would stand by what it regarded as its interests, even in opposition to the position of the US). Concern also existed about possible similar uprisings by the Shiite minority within Saudi Arabia, which over the previous two years had begun to foment potential unrest. Still another motive was preventing Iran from increasing its influence in Bahrain.<sup>4</sup>

To a large extent, the Syrian civil war was a watershed in all matters pertaining to the balance of power between the two axes. Before the conflict began in Syria (where events have since made it a theater of regional conflict), it appeared that the overthrow of the pseudo-republican regimes in North Africa was to the benefit of the Iranian-led radical camp, which would be able to exploit the chaos to heighten its influence in various arenas. The spread of protest to Syria, however, gave the Sunni countries a golden opportunity. They have turned their back on Assad and now await his downfall, if only because Iran would thereby lose a key ally. From their perspective, Assad's fall would restore Iran to its "natural size."

Hamas, which in the wake of the Syrian civil war distanced itself from its traditional benefactors of Iran and Syria and even publicly condemned the Assad regime, has begun to take shelter under the diplomatic and economic umbrella of the Sunni axis. Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense in the Gaza Strip in 2012 boosted the Sunni axis, because Sunni states helped bring about the ceasefire agreement. Iran was disturbed by the way that Egypt and its allies (Qatar and Turkey) led the mediation for a

ceasefire, with Cairo becoming the primary contact during the fighting. According to Iran, these states are becoming patrons of the Palestinian cause, and are earning political and public relations points while shunting Iran to the sidelines. They are depriving Iran of credit for the military aid it gave Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which enabled the latter to fight against Israel. When Iran's substantial diplomatic and economic isolation are added to the picture, it appears that momentum is on the side of the Sunni bloc states. The possibility that Assad's regime will give way to a regime controlled by the Sunni majority in Syria would constitute decisive confirmation of the revival of the Sunni axis, after a decade in which it was at a disadvantage, following the "loss" of Iraq to Iran.

The ongoing plunge in Iran's popularity in public opinion, as reflected in surveys conducted in Arab and Muslim countries in recent years, has likewise contributed to a rise in the popularity of the Sunni camp. In all the countries surveyed other than Lebanon and Iraq, Iran's role in Bahrain and Syria was perceived as more negative than positive. In addition, except for Lebanon and Libya, the number of respondents who thought that Iran was developing nuclear weapons was greater than the number who thought that Iran was pursuing peaceful nuclear development.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, despite some erosion in Turkey's popularity in the Middle East and North Africa, it remains the country in the region most positively perceived.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Key Members of the Emerging Axis**

*Saudi Arabia's* effort to unite the monarchies out of concern about popular unrest against them, and to form a monarchial bloc as a counterweight against Iran, has thus far been unsuccessful. In December 2011, Saudi King Abdullah called on the six Arab Gulf states "to go beyond the stage of cooperation to the stage of union in one entity." However, despite expectations that a union – even if only partial – would be announced, the idea was suspended, ostensibly in order to give the members more time to assess the proposed framework and settle their disputes. At the same time, the regional unrest has to date not caused the downfall of any of the monarchies in the region. Moreover, even though significant disputes complicate relations among them, the Gulf states constitute the most unified and effective bloc in the Arab world.

In addition to its natural inclination to remain behind the scenes and focus on diplomatic mediation, Saudi Arabia faces significant challenges

at home, including a potential succession crisis, internal and external calls for political reform, and simmering unrest among the Shiites in the eastern district, problems that make it difficult for Saudi Arabia to assume a leading role. Yet Saudi Arabia, despite important structural weaknesses, is still determined to promote a new regional order. The kingdom, which supplies economic aid and advanced weaponry to the opposition in Syria,<sup>7</sup> wants to see Assad's regime fall, if only because Iran would thereby lose a key ally, the radical axis would be undermined, and Saudi Arabia would have the opportunity of joining the leadership of a larger and more unified Sunni camp. As long as it succeeds in managing the conflict through its "clients," the kingdom believes that with each passing day, even if it is not nearing victory, it benefits from the situation, because its enemies – Iran, the Assad regime, and Hizbollah – are suffering casualties and growing weaker.

*Qatar's* enormous economic power and readiness to use it for political purposes, combined with the weakness of several traditional power centers stemming from the upheaval in the Arab world, have highlighted the emirate's growing power and its particular brand of foreign policy. Qatar has been actively involved in most of the upheavals in the region, from Libya to Syria, where the emirate is so far the leading contributor to the rebels, with an estimate of \$3 billion since the outbreak of the civil war.<sup>8</sup> The October 2012 visit to the Gaza Strip by the Emir of Qatar was the first visit there by a head of state since the Hamas takeover. Qatar's activity in the internal struggle between Fatah and Hamas in the Palestinian arena is not new, but it underscores the drive to fill the vacuum left by Egyptian weakness. The emirate's goal is to assume a place of honor alongside Egypt, which is preoccupied with internal problems, as a key sponsor in the efforts to mediate between the two Palestinian movements. In addition, the \$8 billion in aid to Egypt by Qatar and its promise of future investment in the Egyptian economy,<sup>9</sup> even if it apparently comes without any official strings, will give it more influence over Egypt's policy than it enjoyed under the Mubarak regime, when relations between Cairo and Doha were strained.

What motivates the involvement of this gas-rich emirate in the regional revolutions? Probably it seeks to establish its leading role in the Middle East and perhaps also to avoid any uprising in its own territory. But Qatar's power is not unlimited; its activism, particularly its support for Islamic forces and Islamists in the region, is arousing opposition

among the other monarchies, which fear the strengthening of elements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

As a result of the Syrian crisis, Hamas has distanced itself from Iran and Syria – providers of economic assistance and advanced weaponry – while becoming closer to Egypt and Qatar, where several of its senior officials reside. Qatar's relations with Hamas in part led Israel in March 2011 to sever relations with Qatar and close its diplomatic delegation in Doha, ban holders of Qatari passports from visiting the West Bank, and halt cooperation between Qatar and Israel's defense industries. Israel was presumably not pleased by the Emir's visit to the Gaza Strip and the resulting gain for Hamas: even if the organization's dissociation from the radical axis is in itself positive, the new closeness had a negative impact on relations between Israel and Qatar.

*Turkey*, which is trying to balance its rediscovery of the Middle East in recent years with maintaining close relations with the West, constitutes an important link in the emerging Sunni axis. While some Arab countries remain ambivalent about Turkey's efforts to return to a position of leadership in the Middle East, its opposition to Israel and the option of alternative Sunni leadership to Iran are perceived positively in Arab capitals. On the other hand, Turkey's "return" to the Middle East is likely to be at the expense of some Arab countries' standing in the leadership of the Islamic world, and also in the Arab world. Negative memories of the Ottoman Empire are still fresh in some capitals, and the Turkish model threatens the conservative character of the Sunni monarchies.

The warm reception accorded Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on his September 2011 visit to Egypt<sup>10</sup> was accompanied by criticism from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Before his arrival in Egypt, he stated, "A secular country respects all religions. Don't be wary of secularism. I hope there will be a secular state in Egypt."<sup>11</sup> He stressed that people should have the right to choose whether or not to be religious, and cited himself as an example of a Muslim prime minister heading a secular country. In response, a Muslim Brotherhood spokesman said that Erdogan's remarks were interference in Egypt's internal affairs.<sup>12</sup> Since then, the Turkish leadership has shown more caution, and has emphasized that it does not intend to export the Turkish model, but only wishes to assist those who have asked for its help.<sup>13</sup>

Operation Pillar of Defense exposed the problems in Turkish policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Following the deterioration in

relations between Israel and Turkey and Turkey's unequivocal support for Hamas, Turkey was left with no actual ability to mediate and exert influence, beyond its statements condemning Israeli policy.<sup>14</sup> The campaign once again demonstrated the fact that Turkey had lost its status as the leading mediator in the region – a status it enjoyed before the Arab uprising as a result of the weakness of the Arab countries, particularly Egypt. At the same time, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's apology to Erdogan in March 2013, and the prospect of some thawing in Israeli-Turkish relations, could help bolster Turkish influence over developments between Israel and the Palestinians.

*Egypt* profited both regionally and internationally from its success as a mediator in Operation Pillar of Defense. The new Egyptian regime's ability to bring about a lull was a considerable achievement. Morsi did not want prolonged escalation because he feared that it would increase public criticism in general, especially from the Muslim Brotherhood, and fuel demands for extreme measures such as revoking the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, a move that could exact a heavy economic and political price from Egypt in the international arena. Egypt will likely play a key role in the future in moderating the conflict between Israel and Hamas, because Egypt remains an acceptable mediator to both parties. On the other hand, it is questionable whether Egypt can play a significant role in the regional arena at a time when it must cope with dramatic internal events. For example, Egyptian Minister of Defense General Abed al-Fatah al-Sisi warned in January 2013<sup>15</sup> that Egypt was in danger of disintegrating. Its shaky economic situation, reflected in its almost total lack of foreign currency reserves, a large budget deficit, and unemployment of nearly 25 percent among young people (while 60 percent of Egypt's population is below the age of 30),<sup>16</sup> forces Egypt to turn to new channels in a search for resources. In March 2013, in order to encourage the Egyptian tourism industry – and less likely as an overture to the regime in Tehran – Egypt even renewed its direct flights to and from Iran, after a 34-year break.<sup>17</sup>

### **Cohesion of the Sunni Axis**

Notwithstanding what appears to be a strengthening of the Sunni camp, there is also a split within it. While Turkey, Qatar, and even Egypt under Muslim Brotherhood leadership are inclined to support organizations like Hamas and a considerable degree of change in the status quo, other Gulf states as well as Jordan are concerned about the rise in power of

political Islam and are trying to do their best to defend the status quo. Jordan's King Abdullah II even warned in this context that a new radical axis, the "Muslim Brotherhood Crescent" centered in Egypt and Turkey, was forming and threatening to change the character of the region.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Erdogan's aggressive line toward Israel in recent years is not shared by Saudi Arabia and several other Gulf states, which prefer quiet cooperation with Israel.<sup>19</sup>

Even with respect to the Syrian issue, where a greater convergence of interests among the Sunni axis members would be expected, disputes exist. The Saudis and the Qataris support different, at times competing, factions within the rebels groups; Qatar, for example, backs the more radical groups and works with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is anathema to Riyadh. Also, there is a fundamental difference between Turkey and Jordan on the one hand and Saudi Arabia on the other. As countries bordering Syria, Turkey and Jordan must deal with influences infiltrating from the Syrian civil war (refugees, a higher probability of terrorism), and this constitutes a key factor underlying their policies. Saudi Arabia is disappointed that Turkey's harsh rhetoric toward the Assad regime is not accompanied by physical measures.<sup>20</sup> The prolonged stalemate in Syria is largely to Saudi Arabia's benefit, because it weakens its enemies and requires relatively little investment on its part. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia fears that if and when Assad falls, the power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria will grow substantially, which in turn might affect the stability of certain Gulf states. Egypt and Qatar, however, the other leading partners in the axis, see matters quite differently. Moreover, in the absence of a clear decision in Syria, the split between the Sunni factions fighting in Syria and their respective backers is liable to widen.<sup>21</sup>

There are even visible gaps in perception between the Sunni axis members on the fundamental question that would presumably unite them – Iran. Together with Egypt, which is bolstering its economic and diplomatic ties with Iran, Turkey does not regard the threat from Iran in the same way as do some of the Gulf states. For example, while Turkey is proud of its mediation attempt in March 2010 with Brazil regarding the Iranian nuclear program, some of the Gulf states were less approving.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, while these states agree that a Middle East free of nuclear weapons is a desirable goal, the fact that it will probably prove unachievable makes the discussion of other strategies urgent. Turkey

holds that the Gulf states are exaggerating the threat of Iranian nuclear capability, and claims that this question can only be solved through negotiations. In addition, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu argued that the P5+1, which is negotiating with Iran, should include Turkey and Saudi Arabia and become the P5+3.<sup>23</sup>

The internal weakness already existing in some Middle East and North African countries, and expectations that this trend will continue and gather momentum, may pose a significant challenge to the emerging Sunni axis, which will find it difficult to formulate a clear message of unity (on both the intra-Sunni and Sunni-Shiite fronts) that can convince the masses. The weakness of these regimes is hazardous for the Sunni axis for two main reasons. The first is that it can create additional hot spots of Shiite-Sunni conflict, thereby dragging the Sunni axis states into various levels of intervention in many places, including some near their borders, which could sap their strength. (Yemen is an example of a weak state in which Iran is stepping up its negative involvement, which is liable to push Saudi Arabia again into military intervention. The same can happen in Syria, which is in danger of splitting into cantons.) The second is that this weakness at the national level also affects Egypt, one of the main players in the Sunni axis's current lineup. Building an axis on such a shaky foundation guarantees trouble, and it is already apparent that Iran is looking for ways to improve its relations with Egypt given the latter's weakness, despite Saudi Arabia's efforts to block developments of this kind.

### Conclusion

The advantage of a multi-polar system lies in its flexibility.<sup>24</sup> The question arises whether in the Middle East multi-polar flexibility is giving way to the creation of a more rigid bi-polar system. Such a development could restrain Iran on the one hand, but also escalate local conflicts and spark a general regional conflagration. The Sunni countries appear more willing than ever to harness their diplomatic, economic, and even military assets to the effort to obstruct Iran and its proxies. At the same time, they do not regard the Iranian threat with an identical degree of alarm, and this is therefore also a source of tension between these countries, joining their differing views of the role of political Islam, with an emphasis on the Muslim Brotherhood. The latter bone of contention between them detracts from the axis's ability to take joint action. Similarly, the outbreak

of the Syrian civil war brought together different elements that want to see Assad weakened, but no matter how this effort plays out, it will most probably intensify existing rifts.

Thus if the rise of the Sunni axis persists, there will likely be a paradigm shift in the Middle East dominated more by sectarian and ideological colors. Iran's power and influence may fade, but political Islam will become stronger in the Middle East, which is liable to make the region less tolerant toward Israel and the West. The Sunni Islamic movements are already experiencing a golden age, and play a major role in government in many of the states that have undergone a revolution.

For the Americans, the rise of the Sunni axis can potentially be a positive development, as a source of regional legitimacy in the struggle against the Iranian nuclear program. The three leading states in the Sunni axis – Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt – are states where the US has invested heavily in maintaining their Western orientation. Still, there are difficult tensions in the relations between each of these three states and the US. In particular, it appears that the challenges facing the US in preserving its relations with Egypt under the Morsi regime will be complex. Each of these three countries, however, has a strong incentive to maintain its relations with the US at their current level. On the other hand, where Syria is concerned, the active role of the Gulf states in financing and arming the rebels, and the fact that jihadist factions are exerting a growing influence on events in parts of that country, are likely to constitute a threat to the US and Israel.<sup>25</sup>

From Israel's perspective, greater regional firmness toward Iran is a positive development. Indeed, what Israel and the Sunni axis have shared in recent years was concern about Iran. This common interest has reportedly also led to cooperation in intelligence and coordination of positions with regard to Iran, at least between Israel and several of the Arab Gulf states. Israel and several of the monarchies also share another interest. To date, Israel and most of the monarchies have demonstrated their preference for preserving the status quo and halting the rise of political Islam, out of concern about the results of the upheaval in the region – another reason for deepening the tacit alliance between them.

The geopolitical change portrayed here offers an opportunity to further isolate Iran, limit its penetration of the Arab world, and complicate its efforts to support its proxies on Israel's borders.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, as terrorist organizations like Hamas become closer to the Sunni axis, their

operations against Israel are likely to be considerably more restrained, even if Hamas wishes to continue receiving military support from Iran. On the other hand, this trend could hamper Israel's freedom of diplomatic and military action. If and when Israel and Hamas square off militarily again, Hamas will receive more diplomatic and economic support from the Sunni axis countries than in the past. Furthermore, although the Sunni countries are considered pro-Western with a more moderate policy toward Israel than Iran, they still largely support Islamic ideology, sometimes in an extreme version that vehemently opposes Israel.

### Notes

- 1 Yoel Guzansky, "Iraq and the Arabs Following American Withdrawal," *Strategic Assessment* 15, no. 3 (2012): 42.
- 2 Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak also add the Second Lebanese War (2006) to this list of "achievements." See Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak, "Introduction," in *The Sunna and Shi'a in History: Division and Ecumenism in the Muslim Middle East*, eds. Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak (New York: Palgrave, 2011), p. 9.
- 3 F. Stephen Larrabee, "Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council," *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 4 (2011): 695.
- 4 John R. Bradley, *After the Arab Spring: How the Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), p. 84.
- 5 Zogby Research Services, "Looking at Iran: How 20 Arab & Muslim Nations View Iran & Its Policies," March 5, 2013, [http://www.aaiusa.org/page/-/Images/Polls/LookingAtIranPoll3\\_5\\_13.pdf](http://www.aaiusa.org/page/-/Images/Polls/LookingAtIranPoll3_5_13.pdf).
- 6 In an August 2012 survey by TESEV, a Turkish research institute, 69 percent of those surveyed expressed positive views of Turkey, compared with 78 percent in 2011. Sixty-five percent of those surveyed in 2012 held positive views of Egypt, 62 percent approved of the United Arab Emirates, and 60 percent approved of Saudi Arabia, compared with 37 percent who expressed positive views of Iran. See also: Mensur Akgun and Sabiha Senyuçel Gundogar, *The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2012* (Istanbul: TESEV, December 2012), p. 9.
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- 21 Katrina Dalacoura, "The Arab Uprisings Two Years On: Ideology, Sectarianism and the Changing Balance of Power," *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 1 (2013): 86.
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