

## Has a Golden Age of Sunni Cooperation Dawned?

The Arab Spring has damaged non-Sunnis as much as Sunnis; to the latter, it has actually brought a newfound convergence.

Amos Yadlin / July 21, 2016

Beginning in 2011 with the Arab Spring, the Middle East—as Ofir Haivry correctly [observes](#)—has undergone irreversible changes. In his judgment, these events marked “the crumbling of a century-old Sunni Arab regional order.” But this view ignores both the region’s history and its current trends. In fact, there never was a single Sunni Arab order; rather, there were numerous competing Sunni orbits. Nor has the Arab Spring done greater damage to Sunni Arab states than to non-Sunni ones (or to those affiliated with Iran). If anything, the current unrest has molded today’s Sunnis into a more unified bloc in the effort to maintain regional stability.

Let’s take these points one by one.

Prior to the rise of Iran and the recently growing threat of instability, Sunni Arab leaders displayed little sense of sectarian solidarity. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser denounced the royal family of Saudi Arabia and encouraged revolution against them and other monarchs; for their part, the Saudi royals offered asylum to the members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the group that allegedly attempted to murder Nasser. The tension between the two regimes culminated in the mid-1960s when, during the civil war in North Yemen, the Saudis supported the Shiite monarchy and Egypt backed a military coup—thus yielding a proxy war between the two Sunni hegemonic powers. (To complicate the sectarian narrative further, the shah of Iran, who sided with the Saudis, supplied the Yemenite royalists with arms.) A similar pattern arose in the 1991 Gulf War when Saddam Hussein, the Sunni strongman of Iraq, invaded the Sunni country of Kuwait, triggering a U.S.-led campaign against him at the request of the Sunni monarchy of Saudi Arabia.

Next, were Sunni or Sunni-oriented regimes the major casualties of the Arab Spring? Hardly. The Alawite Assad regime in Syria, a critical conduit for Shiite Iranian influence in the Arab world, has been militarily and economically [devastated](#) by the ongoing uprising against it since 2011, and its future remains in doubt. In turn, the post-2011 chaos in Syria created fertile ground for the Islamic State (IS), whose subsequent march into Iraq was an important factor in compelling Nuri al-Maliki, effectively Shiite Iran’s [man in Baghdad](#), to resign the premiership in 2014. (To Tehran’s [dismay](#), Haider al-Abadi, Maliki’s replacement, has already shown a greater willingness to stand up to Iran.) In Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was deposed as a result of Arab Spring protests, is a Zaydi Shiite. By contrast, the North

African countries of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, all of which have experienced dramatic changes since 2010, will continue to be ruled by Sunni Arabs for the foreseeable future, if only because all of the centers of power in these countries, whether affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood or with the military establishment, are dominated by the Sunni majority.

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