Domestic Upheavals and Changes in the Regional Strategic Balance

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Introduction

In seeking to explain the behavior of members of Congress on national and international issues, the legendary Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill once famously remarked, "All politics is local." What he meant, of course, was that the outcomes of political contests driven primarily by local concerns had important ramifications for the national agenda and the international system. The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for the upheavals that have shaken the Arab world since the beginning of 2011. These upheavals are primarily domestic phenomena. Those involved in efforts to oust incumbent regimes have been driven largely by their accumulated resentment of material and moral deprivation due to the incompetence, corruption, and malfeasance of repressive regimes. Popular dissatisfaction was emboldened by the growing sense of empowerment stemming from modern communications technologies and the inspirational effect of the unexpectedly swift disintegration in Tunisia of the first brick in the authoritarian wall. Nevertheless, the outcomes of these upheavals also have important ramifications for strategic balances, since regional and international alignments of states may well change in the aftermath of regime change. And for that very reason, third parties likely to be positively or adversely affected by essentially domestic political developments in other states have a strong incentive to try to influence the outcomes of those developments.

As of late 2012, only four Arab governments had actually been overthrown, and the impact of those changes on regional balances remained fairly modest. However, because of the apparent vulnerability of regimes in many other parts of the region, and particularly because of the explosion of "identity politics" in recent years, the potential for far more dramatic change, though not yet realized, remains in place. Depending on the outcomes of ongoing and future challenges to regimes in other Arab states, especially Syria, and even to the integrity of some of those states, the Middle East state system might yet undergo a truly profound transformation.

External Involvement in Internal Changes

In the last great wave of domestic upheavals in the Arab world, in the 1950s and 1960s, radical Arab nationalist forces led by Gamal Abd al-Nasser waged a relentless struggle against conservative regimes – particularly pro-Western monarchies – whose main bulwark was Saudi Arabia. This struggle did not normally lead to direct military confrontation but instead focused on the character, policies, and alignments of regimes in regional states, and like the counterpart struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union, was largely waged by indirect means such as subversion, propaganda, money, espionage, and the use of proxy forces, along with occasional military intervention. Moreover, the competition had a significant ideological component, in the sense that arguments about the proper form and purpose of government played a dual role of both stakes and instrument of the competition. Indeed, the study that best captures the nature of this competition was entitled "The Arab Cold War" in a deliberate effort to echo at the regional level what was underway among the superpowers at the global level.[1] Of course, the notion that the Middle East then was a tight bipolar system was as much an oversimplification as was the characterization of the entire world as a tight Soviet-American rivalry. The boundaries of the region were ambiguous and neither camp was highly disciplined. Moreover, many states that Egypt and Saudi Arabia viewed primarily as arenas of competition saw themselves as full equals if not active competitors with the two leading Arab states. Still, those two states served as the effective poles of the regional strategic balance, and

the competition between them was comprehensive, multi-dimensional, and pervasive.[2]

In many important respects, the interplay between domestic developments and foreign involvement in the current wave of upheavals constitutes another round of regional cold war, though this time it extends to important non-Arab actors, namely, Turkey and especially Iran. In this round, however, the nature of the contest has become immensely more complicated because of strengthened sectarian and ethnic identities, i.e., sub-state and supra-state identities. In classical realist theory, the highest purpose of foreign policy was to maintain the state's independence and security by promoting a balance of power in whatever regional or global system impinged on it. Conceptualized this way, calculation of state (or "national") interest was a fairly mechanical operation, dictated by material realities of power – size, population, geography, topography, natural resources, military assets, and so on. The state itself was something of a black box; domestic politics, ideology, the nature of the regime, and other considerations were of secondary importance because the national interest was more or less objectively revealed and would ultimately determine a state's foreign policy orientation. In other words, definition of national interest could almost be reduced to the simplistic formula, "Where you stand depends on where you sit."

Realism was the hegemonic paradigm in the academic discipline of international relations of the twentieth century.[3] However, its very parsimony – particularly through the reification of state and national interest – subjected it to constant criticism, amendment, and efforts to explain why states so often did not do what realist theory said they should do. For purposes of this analysis, perhaps the most glaring lacuna is the theory's inability to account for issues of primordial solidarity, that is, the tendency of regimes and publics to align or at least sympathize with other actors in the regional/international system with whom they feel the greatest affinity, rather than with those whose wellbeing best promotes their understanding of the requirements for regional/international balance. The current regional constellation is largely (though not exclusively) characterized by competition between a Shiite camp dominated by the Islamic Republic of Iran and a Sunni camp led by Saudi Arabia (though again, as in the 1950s

and 1960s, not without other pretenders to prominence, especially Turkey and, since the overthrow of Husni Mubarak, Egypt). In a competition framed in these terms, where governments and publics stand may still depend on where they sit, but where they sit often depends on who they are. And this dynamic is increasingly evident, not only in Syria, but also in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and other heterogeneous states, where the answer to the question of "who will rule?" seems to prefigure, if not predetermine, the answer to the question "in alignment with whom?"

It would be wrong to infer that this phenomenon is confined to the Middle East. In the domestic convulsions in the Balkans that led to the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, Muslims elsewhere generally tended to support Bosnians and Kosovars (notwithstanding the reservations of some authoritarian Arab rulers at what looked like a potentially dangerous precedent of foreign military intervention), but the sympathies of Orthodox Greeks and Orthodox Russians lay more with Orthodox Serbs. Nor is identity solely a factor in post-"Arab Spring" politics. It appeared to be an important factor in policy alignments during the Iraq-Iraq War, when almost all Sunni Arab states – and not just those in immediate jeopardy because of their proximity to Iran – supported Iraq; only Alawite-controlled Syria allied itself with Iran. It also seems to explain the support given by different Middle East states to the various parties in the hot and cold domestic war in Lebanon over the past four decades.

However, while sectarian and/or ethnic conflicts have afflicted the region for a long time, the salience of identity bipolarity has increased dramatically since the onset of the wave of upheavals in the Arab world. This has translated into the efforts of some states to influence the course of developments in other states in order promote outcomes expected to be congenial to their regional concerns or, alternatively, to forestall detrimental realignments, all based to a large degree on the identities of domestic belligerents.

Regime Change and Regional Balances

Identity politics were not immediately evident at the outset of the so-called "Arab Spring." The lines of regional fracture were already in place, with an Iranian-led camp of "resistance" pitted against the so-called "moderate"

or "pragmatic" pro-Western camp, whose most prominent members were Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Tunisia, where the rule of Zine al-Abdin Bin Ali was the first to come under siege, is one of the most homogeneous societies in the region, and responses to the uprising against him therefore followed more familiar ideological/policy lines. Iran hailed any incipient threat to a member of the Saudi/Egyptian bloc and even claimed to be the Islamic inspiration behind the popular uprising. For their part, most other regimes were generally reticent about developments in Tunisia, though there was certainly some concern about the possibility of a demonstration effect if the opposition succeeded in ousting Bin Ali. In any event, the army's decision to convince Bin Ali to leave meant that the uprising was over too quickly and involved too little bloodshed to enable or oblige outside parties to mount any serious effort to help shape events. Moreover, what followed was a relatively smooth transition to democratic elections that brought the seemingly "moderate" al-Nahda Islamists to power, and they, at least so far, have concentrated almost exclusively on domestic reconstruction. Although Salafists have become increasingly assertive and there are grounds for concern that democracy in Tunisia might ultimately produce an illiberal regime, Tunisia's transformation has not had any perceptible impact on its regional and global orientation, and hence, on regional strategic alignments.[4]

Perhaps more surprisingly to many observers, the same can be said about the second Arab state to experience regime change: Egypt. As in Tunisia, the anti-regime demonstrations that erupted in Egypt were initially largely driven by modern, urban, middle class young people protesting against the stagnation and repression of government under Mubarak, though they went on longer and involved more bloodshed than in Tunisia. As in Tunisia, the uprising lacked any obvious religious, sectarian, or ethnic dimension, not because Egypt is equally homogenous – it has a very sizable Coptic Christian minority – but because the Copts, though constantly exposed to harassment and discrimination, did not feel systematically disenfranchised by the regime or threatened by the anti-regime movement until the Islamists, somewhat belatedly, jumped on the bandwagon. And likewise as in Tunisia, the ruler was ultimately ousted by a "soft coup" by the army that despite continuing instability, preserved

major components of the Mubarak system long enough for people to begin questioning whether regime change had actually taken place at all. Unlike Tunisia, however, Egypt, by virtue of its demographic weight, military strength, and historical and cultural centrality, had always been at the core of the Arab state system, and political transformation there fully engaged the attention of the entire region.

In particular, the camp of "resistance" rejoiced at Mubarak's sudden vulnerability and ultimate overthrow. Bashar al-Assad in Syria exulted at the travails of his most prominent regional nemesis, which he interpreted as vindication of his own, quite different political path, and the Iranian leadership insisted that Mubarak was paying the price for Egypt's 30-year rift with Iran and suppression of the dreams of Muslims there to embrace Iran's model of Islamic revolution. However, Egypt is far too large and self-contained for outside actors to have any decisive influence on the course of domestic developments, and their rhetorical intervention appears not to have resonated much with either pro- or anti-regime forces. And when it ultimately transpired that Iranians were at least partially correct in their analysis, in the sense that Islamism is a much deeper current in Egyptian society than many others (especially in the West) had appreciated, the politics of Islamism in Egypt turned out not to work to Iranian advantage.

Encouraged by the overthrow of Mubarak and signs of growing Islamist strength in the Egyptian polity, Iranians seemed to believe that regional currents were flowing their way. Small changes, such as permission for an Iranian warship to transit the Suez Canal, were seen as portents of even greater change, including the possible renewal of Iranian-Egyptian relations severed in 1979 and even the forging of some kind of Iranian-Egyptian entente to fight the nefarious influences of the West and Israel.

However, it became clear that these hopes were at least premature and overblown, if not altogether groundless. After his election to the presidency, Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi chose Saudi Arabia as the destination for his first official foreign visit, a clear sign of how he understood Egypt's proper foreign priorities. Although Morsi did stop off in Tehran in early September 2012 to hand over the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement, his visit lasted only a few hours, did not include a meeting with Iran's Supreme Leader, and had virtually no bilateral

dimension (such as an invitation for a reciprocal visit to Egypt by Iranian leaders). In fact, Morsi's speech at the NAM meeting was highly critical of the Syrian regime and of those who support it, i.e., Iran (according to some reports, Morsi's reference to Syria was blocked by Iranian television). Even more to the point, Morsi deliberately stressed Sunni hagiography by invoking the names of the Prophet Muhammad's "close associates," Abu Bakr, Omar, Othman, and Ali; favorable mention of the first three is anathema to most Shiites.[5]

All in all, the potential for Iranian-Egyptian rapprochement that some had predicted has shown few signs of materializing. There are of course sound geopolitical explanations for this: Egypt's historical role as a Middle East power center and its self-ascribed importance are more consistent with the role of competitor of Iran for preeminence rather than partner (and junior partner, at that). But the significance of sectarian identity, as evidenced by Morsi's speech in Tehran, cannot easily be dismissed. In fact, this may well be an even more salient factor for Islamist Egypt than it was under an ostensibly secular government in Cairo. None of this means that Egypt cannot somehow reassert the Arab preeminence that it once enjoyed under Nasser or that it will not forge new kinds of links, stronger or weaker, with other Middle East (and extra-regional) actors, such as Turkey. But at least in terms of the admittedly simplified depiction of the Middle Eastern state system as a (loose) bipolar competition between the Iranian-led Shiite camp of "resistance" and the more amorphous Sunni Arab camp, Egypt's upheavals have had no real impact on regional strategic alignments.

That is also the case with respect to Libya, though the circumstances of the change there and the reasons for its consequences are different. The ouster of Muammar Qaddafi is the only instance of regime change in this round of Arab upheavals (i.e., since the invasion of Iraq) that can be clearly attributed to foreign intervention. Moreover, while the military aspect of that intervention was the province of Western powers (primarily France, Britain, and the United States), some of its financial and logistical elements came from Arab states, especially Qatar. More importantly, the political cover was provided by Arab and Muslim states, in the form of Arab League resolutions and support for a UN Security Council resolution to protect civilians. Apart from humanitarian considerations, there is still

some uncertainty about the motivation for this behavior on the part of Arab states. In some measure, it may be merely a function of the fact that over the years Qaddafi had managed through threats and insults to alienate almost all his counterparts in other Arab states. Whatever the case, there is no evidence that sectarian or ethnic factors played a role. Libya, though torn by tribal conflicts, is an overwhelmingly Sunni Arab society; there are very few non-Muslims in the country (apart from foreign workers) and very few Shiites. Nor was there much reason for others to think that Qaddafi's downfall would affect the geopolitical balance one way or another, since Libya was not clearly identified with any camp or even any other Arab state. If anything, Qaddafi in recent years had removed himself from Arab affairs and focused his attention on sub-Saharan Africa (though Libya did maintain an eclectic variety of economic ties with others, grounded in its ability to export large quantities of oil and its need to import almost everything else, including workers).

Thus, no other Arab or Muslim state vigorously sprang to Qaddafi's defense. With greater or lesser alacrity, all came to endorse the intervention and to support regime change, and thus the effect on regional strategic alignments was predictably modest. In the first election to replace the Transitional National Council that inherited power from Qaddafi, democratic reformers won an impressive victory (in contrast to the success of Islamists in other post-dictator states). In keeping with their priorities, they have focused on economic ties with the West and maintained a low regional profile. How persistent this pattern remains is largely a function of their ability to ward off the growing threat of radical Islamists. Should the latter eventually prevail, they may well make some kind of common cause with other Islamists in Sunni states, but regardless of the future course of domestic politics, there is little to suggest that Libyans will align themselves with the Iranian-led pole of regional politics.

In Yemen, prolonged and bloody protests also forced long-time President Ali Abdullah Saleh to give up office (though Saleh managed to escape with his life and was succeeded by his Vice President). However, in the confused aftermath of Saleh's departure, it is unclear how much of a regime transformation has actually taken place. Moreover, like Tunisia, Yemen is of decidedly secondary weight in regional affairs, and even if a

clearer political transformation were to take place, it would not decisively alter regional balances. Here, however, two caveats should be added. The first concerns the ethnic/sectarian element involved in Yemeni instability: the presence of a Houthi/Shiite population in the northwest of the country, which rebelled against central rule even before the outbreak of upheavals in the rest of the country and was the beneficiary, according to some, of Iranian support. The second is that central government had long been something of a legal fiction in many parts of the country, leaving considerable space for jihadi elements – al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula – to thrive. For both reasons, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni status quo forces in the regime were supportive of Saleh and will probably try to thwart future developments inimical to their interests in the peninsula, especially if they are seen to benefit Iran.

That was made evident from the one instance thus far of an upheaval with a clear sectarian element that was suppressed with the help of major foreign military intervention – Bahrain. Alone among the Arab principalities of the Gulf, Bahrain has a Shiite majority. When protests and demonstrations broke out in Bahrain in 2011, opposition spokespersons insisted that their demands focused on civil rights and greater political freedom and economic opportunity. Such demands were in any event unlikely to arouse the sympathies of ruling elites in other authoritarian regimes on the western side of the Gulf, but the fact that those Bahrainis who felt themselves at the core of the uprising and played the most prominent role were Shiites inevitably imparted a sectarian tone to the upheavals and, against the background of historical Iranian claims on Bahrain, further raised suspicions about Iranian subversion. Indeed, Iran was vocal in its moral support for the Bahraini opposition, though there is no evidence of any material involvement.

Apprehension about a "contagion" of democracy may well have played some part in the calculations of other Arab Gulf states, but it was undoubtedly the longstanding fear of Iranian hegemonic ambitions that drove them, and particularly Saudi Arabia (which has a large Shiite minority of its own), to throw their full weight behind the efforts of the Khalifas to suppress the revolt. That assistance took the form of direct military intervention by Saudi National Guard units, backed by token forces from the United Arab

Emirates and Kuwait. Arab intervention made it possible for the Khalifas to survive (just as Western intervention had made it possible for Libyan rebels to prevail) and guaranteed that the shift in strategic alignments in the Gulf, with repercussions throughout the rest of the region, which would quite probably have ensued from a political transformation in Bahrain, did not happen. The salience of sectarian identity and primordial attachments in all of this is manifested in the virtual certainty that Iranian and Saudi approaches to domestic upheaval would have been totally reversed had the Bahraini shoe been on the other foot, that is, if an authoritarian Shiite-dominated regime had been challenged by an uprising of a Sunni majority.

This is not just hypothetical conjecture. It describes precisely the situation in Syria.

Regional Strategic Realignment: The Transformation that Hasn't Happened (Yet)

Notwithstanding widespread expectations of transformations in regional alignments, almost two years of upheavals in the Arab world, including the forced replacement of four rulers, have left the Middle East state system virtually unchanged. However, the outpouring of mass unrest has not yet run its course and the potential for regime change to upset strategic balances has not yet been exhausted. The greatest potential for change is in Syria, where competing identities and power agendas collide most violently. In early 2011, shortly after Bin Ali and Mubarak were ousted from office, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad professed to be unconcerned that he would face the same sort of challenge because, he claimed, he was "very closely linked to the beliefs of the people."[6] Shortly thereafter, an incident involving the abuse of a boy caught painting anti-regime graffiti on a wall in the southern town of Daraa provided the spark for an ever-expanding wave of protests and demonstrations against the repression, corruption, and incompetence of Assad's regime. Assad, it seemed, was no more loved by his people than were Bin Ali and Mubarak.

In contrast to Tunisia and Egypt, however, the army did not turn against the ruler, largely because of the particular socio-demographic character of the country. The uprising against Assad did not begin as an overtly sectarian or ethnic movement. Nevertheless, it quickly (and perhaps

inevitably) took on such dimensions. Baath Party ideology was always one of strictly secular and non-sectarian Arab nationalism, and the regime traditionally enjoyed some support in the Sunni community, as well as among the urban commercial elite. In practice, however, the Alawite base of the security organs had privileged the minorities, and especially the Alawites, in all dimensions of Syria's political economy, which in turn fostered a sense of relative deprivation among the Sunni Muslim majority and particular resentment by the Islamists among them of what they saw as rule by heretics. It is therefore not surprising that the opposition could be portrayed as a Sunni movement, and that other minorities, aware of both what happened to Christians in Iraq and the concerns of the Christians in Egypt, were apprehensive about their own fate in the event of an Islamist revival no longer constrained by an authoritarian government. These fears were not entirely unfounded, especially as the Salafi element in the opposition became more visible, but Assad also played on them in order to reduce the risk that the protest would spread to every other demographic component except Alawite. As a result, and notwithstanding protestations to the contrary by both the government and opposition, the conflict in Syria took on an increasingly sectarian character even as it became more violent. More to the point, the centrality of Syria in effect turned the internal conflict into the fulcrum of regional strategic alignments, because its course and outcome were liable to spill over into neighboring states with divided societies and to affect the overall balance between the competing Persian-Arab/Shiite-Sunni poles of power in the region.

The alliance between Iran and the Assad regime in Syria had its historical origins in their common antipathy to Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. Given the seeming contradictions between Persian Islamism and Arab secularism, that alliance could (and can) be seen as "unnatural" and explained only by the instrumentalism of conventional geopolitics. The same interpretive lens could also be applied to the further strengthening of the alliance following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps emissaries helped build a militant Lebanese Shiite movement – Hizbollah – just as Syria itself was also confronting Israel in Lebanon and fighting to maintain its own hegemony in that country. However, it is impossible to dismiss the importance of

sectarian identity as a legitimizer of political power, and in the face of continuing Sunni doubts about the Islamic authenticity of Alawites, even Bashar's father, Hafez, needed to secure acceptable certification in order to forestall widespread protests that he did not meet the constitutional requirement that Syria's president be a Muslim. That certification came in 1973 from a recognized Shiite cleric, the Lebanese activist Imam Musa al-Sadr (long before the Islamic Revolution in Iran), and sealed the affinity between Shiites and Alawites in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of Sunnis.[7]

Since the outbreak of the uprising in Syria, Assad has defied endless predictions of his imminent demise. His ability to persist is due in no small part to Iran's financial, operational, technical, logistical, and intelligence support, support which, according to many reports, has even extended to the active combat involvement of Revolutionary Guard Corps troops (the al-Quds Brigade). The superficial explanation for Iran's commitment is that Assad's regime is a strategic asset. That is certainly true, but it begs the question why it is an asset, that is, why it is so widely (and almost certainly correctly) assumed that Assad's survival will keep Syria in the Iranian camp but that his fall – unless brought about by a coup of Alawite officers who succeed in holding on to power themselves – would result in Syria's reorientation away from Iran. And the most persuasive, indeed, obvious answer to that question is that the sectarian affinity between Iran and the holders of power in Syria would be ruptured.

Moreover, the repercussions of Assad's downfall and a Syrian-Iranian rift would (in fact, already do) extend far beyond the bilateral domain, precisely for the same reason. Iran's second major strategic ally/asset, Hizbollah, has also committed itself to supporting the Assad regime – the Syrian opposition even claims to have captured some of its fighters in Syria – and contesting attitudes toward events in Syria raise concerns about the re-ignition of sectarian tensions in Lebanon. On the other hand, the only other member of the "resistance" bloc, Hamas, was forced to distance itself from Assad because it could no longer justify its alignment with a "Shiite regime" killing Sunnis, notwithstanding its own links to Iran. By the same token, Sunni states have increasingly lined up behind the Syrian opposition, with Qatar and Saudi Arabia taking the lead in suspending

Syria's membership in the Arab League, advocating United Nations sanctions against Assad, and supplying funds and weapons (through Turkey) to Syrian rebel forces.[8] They have recently received at least moral reinforcement from Egyptian President Morsi. Jordan, though careful not to commit itself openly, undoubtedly has little sympathy for Assad's (and Iran's) difficulties; after all, it was King Abdullah, long before the outbreak of the upheavals in the Arab world, who warned against the emergence of a "Shiite crescent" in the Levant. Even Turkey, which under the AKP had ostensibly sought to promote good relationships with all its neighbors in the region, including Syria and Iran (but excepting Israel), has become increasingly critical of what some Turks have labeled "the minority Nusayris [sic] regime" in Damascus and of its sectarian motivations, "which are the traits of the regime" in Iran.[9] That stance has not immunized the AKP against accusations that it is itself guilty of "shouldering the Sunni cause to project power in its neighborhood."[10]

Of course, the external alignments of governments can always be explained by some abstract notion of "national interest." But those who still doubt the salience of social or regime identity in determining what constitutes national interest, despite the record of regional responses to the Syrian civil war, might find even more convincing evidence in the convoluted history of Iraq's regional orientation since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by Western forces, the protracted civil strife that followed, and the eventual installation of a Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad. Nothing in the objective circumstances that ostensibly determine national interest in the realist perspective have changed; geography, topography, size of population, and natural resources all remain the same. What did change was the authoritarian shell that, coupled with the ideational hegemony of Arabism, had kept the Shiite majority under Sunni rule.

As a result, Iraq's regional orientation was turned completely on its head. Iran, traditionally the source of Iraqi fear and object of Iraqi loathing, become the magnetic lodestar, the strongest foreign influence in the country – at least in those parts of the country under central (Shiite) government control – and a major economic partner, to the point where an Iraqi Shiite government was helping to undermine economic sanctions against Iran spearheaded by the same United States of America that had

ended the repression of Shiites in Iraq and helped put them in power. And this realignment had a ripple effect. The Syrian regime, a focus of longstanding Iraqi contempt (especially, more recently, among Shiites who were the targets of the "foreign fighters" whose passage to Iraq during the American occupation had been facilitated by Assad), suddenly became the beneficiary of Iraqi diplomatic solicitude (in the Arab League and the United Nations), and gained tolerance for the use of Iraqi airspace for the transfer of Iranian men and materiel to Assad. Moreover, Iraqi Shiite volunteers became actively involved in the fighting in Syria on the side of the regime, while militant Iraqi Sunnis joined the battle against Assad.[11] For their part, Arab Gulf states, which had backed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran because they saw him as a bulwark against the expansion of Iranian regional hegemony, now adopted a distinctly cool and suspicious attitude toward Iraqi President Nuri al-Maliki because they saw him variously as a stooge or active facilitator of Iranian hegemony.

Non-State Actors

Iraqi volunteers are not the only non-state actor potentially able to influence regional alignments, or even the most important. That distinction probably belongs to the Kurds, for some of whom the "Arab Spring" has presented new opportunities due to Turkish-Syrian and Turkish-Iranian tensions as well as the weakening of central governments in Syria (and in Iraq in the aftermath of American-initiated regime change). The Kurdish aspiration for collective self-expression has historically been repressed by Arab, Turks, and Persians of both the Shiite and Sunni persuasion, and though mostly Sunnis themselves, the Kurds show no instinctive affinity with any other population in the region. Consequently, they maneuver more easily between contending forces, choosing at any particular moment to base their alignments on instrumental considerations. Fluidities in regional alignments prompted by events in Syria have prompted the Assad regime and Iran to allow greater latitude to the PKK to prosecute its on-again, off-again campaign against Turkey, thereby shattering the consensus between those three states known as the "Pax Adana."[12] But if the Kurds of PKK remain fixated on their confrontation with Turkey and therefore make temporary common cause with Syria and Iran, those in the Kurdish

Regional Government in northern Iraq are driven to maintain cooperative relations with Turkey, in order to guarantee the economic underpinnings of their autonomy from the central government in Baghdad. In short, the transitory interests of various Kurdish elements do not always converge, making it difficult for them to function as a unified strategic actor.

Nor are the Kurds not the only identity group plagued by competing/conflicting interests and approaches. For all their atavistic solidarity against other identity groups, both Sunnis and Shiites are divided on ethnic grounds as well as ideologically between Islamists and non-Islamists. This categorization also underestimates differences between "moderate" and Salafi Islamists and between liberal and radical nationalist non-Islamists, differences that sometimes blur in the ongoing struggle for political supremacy.

Conclusion

The fundamental variable in the prospective evolution of the strategic balance in the Middle East is the outcome of what has become a civil war in Syria. If Assad (or even the regime without Assad) manages to prevail, then near term changes in the balance are likely to be marginal, at most. But if the regime is ousted, then just as regime change shifted the domestic sectarian balance in Iraq and reoriented that country in ways that altered strategic alignments in the region, so such change in Syria would shift that country's domestic sectarian balance and its orientation in ways that would have a no less momentous impact on the regional strategic alignments, especially with respect to the underlying competition between the Persian/Shiite and Arab/Sunni poles of regional Middle Eastern politics.

Of course, even if that dichotomy captures the essence of the strategic balance in the region, it hardly exhausts all scenarios, primarily because the question of identity is too complex to permit a simple one dimensional analysis. One complication is the existence of numerous sub-state and supra-state actors that do not fall clearly into either camp. Another is the fact that the major power centers are themselves not necessarily immutable fixtures. Regime change could still come to Iran, perhaps in ways that would leave Iran with its Shiite identity but prompt it to reorient itself and deprive the Iranian-led regional alignment of its ideological fervor. It is

even conceivable that Iran, with significant non-Persian and/or non-Shiite minorities, could be subjected to the separatist challenges to state viability experienced by Syria and Iraq. The same is true of Saudi Arabia, which has a large, disaffected Shiite population in its Eastern (oil-producing) Province. Were such scenarios of state weakening or state breaking to materialize, the implications for regional alignments would be profound. Weaker major power centers would result in an even less coherent regional system, with more opportunities for second tier actors to balance between them without the powerful impulse of identity to constrain their room for maneuver. Needless to say, that sort of situation would be more congenial both for extra-regional powers anxious to prevent the emergence of regional hegemons and for a regional actor like Israel, which in terms of primordial attractions is an "odd man out."

Even if major power centers do not weaken or dissolve, there is at least a theoretical possibility that political upheavals in the region will, over time, lead to the strengthening of liberal democratic trends that could gradually reduce the salience of sectarian/ethnic identity, or at least encourage it to be expressed in less belligerent and exclusivist ways. From Israel's perspective, the ascendance of liberal democracy (in Iran as well) would be an even more promising (if less likely) development than the emergence of more but weaker power centers and the fragmentation of the state system in the region.

Still, the possibility of a far bleaker evolution cannot be excluded. Writing about Iran's attitude in 2001 to the Taliban, Saddam Hussein, and al-Qaeda, Tony Blair argued that "the hostility was centered on the Shia/Sunni divide, not the methods or world view of either. The battle was about who would lead a reactionary movement within Islam, not who could construct a progressive movement."[13] These of course are not the only forces in the political field. As the "Arab Spring" continues to unfold, there are still liberal elements aspiring to forge a modernist vision of Islam in cooperation with the outside world as well as incumbent authoritarian regimes fighting a rear guard action in the name of no real vision at all. But the wave of upheavals in the Arab world has placed the last group on the defensive and produced only a potential opening for modernists that they have thus far shown little ability to exploit. Instead, it is the Islamists

who are prospering most in both the Sunni and Shiite worlds. It is not yet clear who among all the contenders for social and political power will prevail or even, if the Islamists continue their progress, which variety of Islamism will prevail. But it is not at all inconceivable that the essential dynamic of the Arab uprisings may ultimately result in Blair's depiction of the situation in 2001 applying across the entire Middle East. If it transpires that the eventual consequence of the "Arab Spring" is a clash between a Shiite crescent and Sunni/Salafi crescent, a merely cold war in the region could become a very fond memory.

Notes

1   Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and his Rivals, 1958-1970*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).
2   One of its major manifestations was the effort to sway public opinion in third states by establishing or subsidizing media outlets. The investment was so great that in Lebanon, perhaps the most thoroughly penetrated polity in the region, one cynic was prompted to contradict claims that Lebanon had a free press by insisting that everything said on Lebanese radio or written in Lebanese newspapers was paid for by someone.
3   The seminal realist text was Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).
4   Sarah J. Feuer, "Islam and Democracy in Practice: Tunisia's Ennahdha Nine Months In," *Middle East Brief* No. 66 (Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University, September 2012). For a skeptical view of the distinction between "moderate" and "radical" Islamists based on a leaked video of a meeting between Nahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi and Tunisian Salafists, see Daniel Pipes, "Islamism's Unity," *National Review Online* (October 30, 2012), http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/331975/islamism-s-unity-daniel-pipes#.
5   Dina Ezzat, "Mursi beyond Teheran," *al-Ahram Weekly Online*, Issue No. 1113 (September 6-12, 2012).
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