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The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East

Bassel F. Salloukh

The contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran played out in Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, postwar Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Yemen and Bahrain, has shaped the geopolitics of the region since the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq. The Arab uprisings intensified this geopolitical contest and spread it to Syria. The sectarianisation of the region's geopolitical battles, and the instrumental use of some of the uprisings for geopolitical ends, has hardened sectarian sentiments across the region, complicated post-authoritarian democratic transitions, and, at least in Syria's case, transformed its popular uprising into a veritable civil war.

Keywords: Arab uprisings, geopolitics, Middle East, sectarianism

The popular uprisings that swept across the Arab world like a breath of fresh air in December 2010 seemed to restore to the Arab state system its erstwhile permeability, one it appeared to have lost decades ago.¹ For a moment they appeared to debunk in practice the old, authoritarian regime-constructed false binaries between *raison d'état* and *raison de la nation*.² These early impressions soon collided against the Arab state system's time-honoured geopolitical realities, however.

By the time the euphoria of authoritarian regime breakdown in Tunisia and Egypt settled, the geopolitical contests that defined the regional system before the uprisings resumed with a vengeance. The grand contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran, one that has shaped the geopolitics of the region since the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq, playing itself out in the domestic politics of a number of weak Arab states, including Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, postwar Iraq

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¹See the analysis in Noble, "From Arab System to Middle Eastern System". For an alternative analysis of the Arab world's changing permeability, see Salloukh and Brynen, *Persistent Permeability*.

²See Khalidi, "Thinking the Unthinkable".

and, to a lesser extent, Yemen and Bahrain, resumed after the popular uprisings. In fact, the uprisings intensified and complicated these geopolitical contests, allowing them to spread to a hitherto unimagined new theatre: Syria. Who would have predicted, prior to the outbreak of the uprisings in Syria, that the mighty authoritarian state built by Hafez al-Assad, one that played a central role in 'the struggle for the Middle East' in the past four decades,³ would join its weaker counterparts as yet another theatre in the Iranian-Saudi geopolitical confrontation. Such are the geopolitical consequences of the Arab uprisings.

This article traces the geopolitical battles and transformations of the Middle East regional system since the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq. It opens with an analysis of the geopolitical contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and their respective allies, unleashed in the aftermath of this invasion in three major sites: Iraq, Lebanon, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The balance of the article turns to the impacts of the popular uprisings on the geopolitics of the region, particularly the addition of Syria as a new site of this Saudi-Iranian geopolitical contest. The article also argues that the increased saliency of sectarianism in what are otherwise realist geopolitical battles, and the instrumental use of some of the uprisings for geopolitical ends, has had spillover effects on the domestic politics of a number of post-authoritarian states and, at least in Syria's case, derailed the popular uprising from its original democratic objective and transformed it into a veritable civil war.

Sectarianism as geopolitics by other means

Since its formation on the morrow of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Arab state system has been a deeply penetrated one.⁴ In the first half of the 20th century, attempts at Arab unity camouflaged a subtle but real power struggle between competing Arab poles in Baghdad, Cairo and Riyadh.⁵ During the decades of what Malcolm Kerr famously labelled the "Arab Cold War", and under the guise of Arab nationalism, Cairo spearheaded the 'revolutionary' camp as it challenged the 'conservative' monarchies gathered around Riyadh.⁶ With the 'return of geography' to Arab politics in the decade after Camp David, power contests became localised within sub-regional spheres: Syria sought hegemony over Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO); Saudi Arabia towered over her Gulf counterparts; Iraq was mired in a protracted war with Iran; Egypt was locked out of the Arab state system; and in North Africa, the two major actors, Morocco and Algeria, were at loggerheads over the Western Sahara conflict.⁷

³See Seale, *Asad of Syria*.

⁴See Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East*.

⁵See Porath, *In Search of Arab Unity*.

⁶See Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*.

⁷See Salamé, "Inter-Arab Politics".

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 resuscitated the traditional geopolitical centres of inter-Arab politics. Born during the 10 August 1990 emergency Cairo summit, and later consecrated at the tripartite Alexandria summit between Hosni Mubarak, Hafez al-Assad, and King Fahd on 28–29 December 1994, the Cairo-Damascus-Riyadh axis salvaged a minimum of coordination among the big three geopolitical centres of the Arab world, but in close coordination with Washington.

It was the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the subsequent 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq that fundamentally altered inter-Arab alignments and the geopolitics of the region. Washington stood supreme after the fall of Baghdad as it basked in its ‘moment in the Middle East’.⁸ It dismissed Tehran’s offer to negotiate a new regional modus operandi, and launched an aggressive campaign against its opponents.⁹ However the neoconservative discourse of using the occupation and subsequent democratisation of Iraq as a model for the transformation of Arab states rallied Iraq’s neighbours against US attempts to stabilise the country. Henceforth, sabotaging post-Saddam Iraq became an objective not just of Washington’s regional enemies, such as Iran and Syria, who deployed a mix of classical balancing and asymmetric balancing strategy to defend their geopolitical interests,¹⁰ but also its allies, especially Saudi Arabia.¹¹ Baghdad’s Arab neighbours feared that a stable and democratic Iraq would allow Washington to pursue its post-9/11 regional reform agenda aggressively. Consequently, they resisted US attempts to stabilise and democratise Iraq, opening their borders to Salafi-jihadi fighters en route to Iraq. Indeed, and until the 9 November 2005 coordinated hotel bombings in Amman, Jordan’s capital was labelled the Hanoi of the Salafi-jihadi trail to Iraq.

Washington’s growing troubles in Iraq, and Iran’s ability to assume a dominant role in post-Saddam Iraq, altered the geostrategic balance of power in the region, tipping it in Tehran’s favour. Henceforth the all-too-familiar petty battles of the Arab state system, played out by Arab leaders in annual summits and by their foreign ministers in the Arab League’s preparatory meetings, gave way to a grand geopolitical confrontation: a Saudi-Iranian contest over regional dominance played out mainly in Iraq, Lebanon, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but also in Yemen and Bahrain. Riyadh reasoned that if Iran’s growing regional role was left unchecked in these theatres, then it would one day be forced to confront Tehran in the Persian Gulf, the kingdom’s own strategic backyard.¹² It considered Hezbollah and Hamas proxy instruments in this contest, lacking any agency, and

⁸History will judge whose moment will prove more durable, London or Washington’s. For an analysis of the former, see Monroe, *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East*.

⁹See Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*.

¹⁰See Walt, *Taming American Power*.

¹¹See J. al-Zayn, “La Khatar ‘ala Lubnan Yu’adel Khatar Infijar al-‘Ilaqaat al-Suriya al-Sa’udiya”, *al-Nahar*, 18 August 2007.

¹²For a general overview, see Gause, *International Relations of the Persian Gulf*.

-serving Tehran's geopolitical objective to penetrate and vivisection the Arab world.¹³ This geopolitical confrontation divided the region into US-designated so-called 'moderate' – read pro-US – states against their so-called 'radical' – read anti-US – counterparts. The objective of this confrontation was to contain Iran's newfound strategic position and neutralise its efforts to extend its influence beyond the Iraqi theatre.¹⁴

With US encouragement and support, Riyadh took the lead in balancing and reversing Tehran's influence in all three main sites, rallying to its side the moderate Arab states consisting of Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority (PA), Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and supported implicitly by Israel. Tehran, on the other hand, sought to defend its newfound geopolitical position and expand its regional reach, in alliance with Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, its junior partners in 'the axis of resistance', backed by Russia on the international stage. While often described in sectarian terms, most famously by Jordan's King Abdullah, as a contest between allied Sunni states against an emerging 'Shia Crescent' stretching from Iran to Israel's borders,¹⁵ this was a very realist balance of power contest between two states over regional supremacy.¹⁶ Riyadh deployed sectarianism as an instrument of *Realpolitik* to rally support within the Gulf countries to its foreign policy vis-à-vis Iran.¹⁷

Iraq

Riyadh first assumed a passive policy toward US-occupied Iraq. This stance later turned more proactive as the withdrawal of US troops approached in December 2011. Henceforth Riyadh's strategy in Iraq consisted of preventing or sabotaging a complete Iranian take-over of the country. To this end, Riyadh marshalled an array of military and non-military assets in the Saudi repertoire. This included diplomatic support to pro-Saudi Sunni as well Shia politicians, material support to the Sunni tribal *Sabwa* (Awakening) groups in their war against *al Qaeda*, and intelligence penetration of Salafi-jihadi groups operating in Iraq. Riyadh was unable to prevent Iran's geopolitical victory in Iraq, however. In fact, its confrontation with Iran over Iraq was cause of intermittent friction with Washington. Riyadh's opposition to the pro-Iranian Nuri al-Maliki's selection for a second term as premier on 21 December 2010 clashed against Washington's own preferences, which was then willing to accommodate Iran's influence in Iraq to ensure an amicable withdrawal for US troops. Saudi Arabia consequently opted to destabilise Iraq, a strategy that has wrought havoc in the country, turning the contest over post-Saddam Iraq into

¹³See A. R. al-Rashed, " Hamas: Ima Iran aw al-'Arab?", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 19 January 2009.

¹⁴See Hersh, "A Strategic Shift", http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fact/070305fa_fact_hersh.

¹⁵See Jordanian King Abdullah's comments to the *Washington Post*, 8 December 2004.

¹⁶See Cole, "A 'Shiite Crescent?'".

¹⁷See Gause, "Saudi Arabia".

sectarian war. Iran, on its part, used its political skills and the paramilitary experience of the Quds Force to deny Washington a stable Iraq; Syria opened its borders to Salafi-jihadi fighters destined for Iraq; and Hezbollah operatives in Iran and Iraq trained Shia Iraqi groups in guerrilla warfare against US troops.¹⁸

Lebanon

Lebanon was the second site of the Saudi-Iranian geopolitical confrontation. Lebanon became part of the geopolitical scramble for the region immediately following the fall of Baghdad. Emboldened by its swift victory in Iraq, Washington demanded full-Syrian cooperation in the 'war on terror' and the stabilisation of post-Saddam Iraq; it also requested an end to Syrian interference in Lebanese affairs, the demobilisation and disarmament of Hezbollah and dismantling of its rocket arsenal in south Lebanon, and the deployment of the Lebanese Army over all Lebanese territory, including the southern borders with Israel.¹⁹ Syria's refusal to comply with these US demands elicited UN Security Council Resolution 1559 of 2 September 2004. The resolution declared its support "for a free and fair electoral process in Lebanon's upcoming presidential election conducted according to Lebanese constitutional rules and devised without foreign interference or influence". It also called on "all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon", and mandated the "disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias" – read Hezbollah and pro-Syrian Palestinian groups – in the country.²⁰ Henceforth UNSCR 1559 became a tool against Damascus in the grander geopolitical contest.

The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on 14 February 2005 and the concomitant withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in 26 April 2005 divided Lebanon into two overlapping domestic, regional, and international camps competing for the control of post-Syria Lebanon: on one side was the US, France, the moderate Arab states, and their Lebanese allies gathered in the 14 March coalition led by the Sunni-dominated Future Movement; on the opposing side stood Iran, Syria, and their Lebanese allies led by Hezbollah. The former group sought to relocate Lebanon away from the Syrian-Iranian geopolitical camp, while the latter resisted these efforts. Domestically, the contest involved a Sunni-Shia battle over control of post-Syria Lebanon. Riyadh offered its unwavering support to the 14 March-led government of Prime Minister Fuad Saniora as it faced Hezbollah's opposition to the international tribunal launched to investigate Hariri's assassination,

¹⁸See M. Chulov, "Qassem Suleimani: The Iranian General 'Secretly Running' Iraq", *The Guardian*, 28 July 2011; and J. F. Burns and M. R. Gordon, "U.S. Says Iran Helped Iraqis Kill Five G.I.'s", *New York Times*, 3 July 2007.

¹⁹See N. Nasif, "Ma Taquluh Washington wa Dimashq 'an Muhadathat Burns", *al-Nahar*, 14 September 2004.

²⁰UN Security Council Resolution 1559, 2 September 2004, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/sc8181.doc.htm>.

and refused to resign after Hezbollah organised a massive sit-in in downtown Beirut after the 2006 war in an attempt to topple the government.

On its own, however, Lebanon carried little merit. It was rather an open battlefield for the overlapping warring camps. Threatening to snatch Lebanon away from Syria's orbit was one way to force Damascus to cooperate in Iraq. Similarly, besieging Hezbollah in Lebanon would undermine Iran's geopolitical reach and Syria's regional assets. Consequently, from February 2005 until the promulgation of the Qatari-negotiated 21 May 2008 Doha Accord, the choreography of Lebanese politics closely followed the geopolitical script written by regional and international powers. Lebanon tiptoed over a sectarian minefield as the country manoeuvred through the spillover effects of Hariri's assassination, the formation of the international tribunal to investigate his assassination, the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, sectarian street clashes, demonstrations and sit-ins, culminating in Hezbollah's violent takeover of West Beirut as it battled the Sunni fighters of Hariri's Future Movement. Riyadh and Washington raised the sectarian ante and drowned Hezbollah in a sectarian quagmire to contain the party's efforts to assume control over post-Syria Lebanon, but also to tarnish its appeal as a trans-Islamic and pan-Arab liberation movement, one it had gained after Israel's 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon and its military performance during the 2006 war. Invariably, this brought Lebanon on multiple occasions to the brink of an all-out sectarian conflagration.²¹

West Bank and Gaza Strip

This geopolitical contest was also played out in the West Bank and Gaza Strip between, on the one hand, the PA represented by Mahmoud Abbas and, on the other, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In its quest for geopolitical bridges along Israel's borders, Iran had cultivated close relations with Hamas, a party whose ideological predilections resonated with Tehran's. These relations provided Tehran with a strategic asset in the regional geopolitical confrontation and allowed it to use the threat of military retaliation by its allies to deter an Israeli or US attack against Iran's nuclear facilities or, at a minimum, make such an attack potentially costly. It also helped Tehran debunk the claim that Iran was in pursuit of a so-called Shia Crescent. Consequently, Tehran provided Hamas and Islamic Jihad with military assistance and material, often via Hezbollah and Sudan.

Washington and Riyadh bestowed financial, political and military support on Abbas' PA to balance Tehran's influence. Despite Washington's democracy promotion discourse, it led an international campaign to isolate Hamas, especially after the latter's surprise victory over Fatah during the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections. It conditioned its recognition of the newly elected Hamas government on the latter's recognition of Israel and its acceptance of the International Quartet's

²¹For a more comprehensive discussion, see Salloukh, "Democracy in Lebanon".

– that is, the US, the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia – conditions for any prospective PA government to gain international recognition and funding, namely recognising Israel, renouncing terrorism and violence, and accepting the PA's previous commitments and obligations vis-à-vis Israel. When Hamas balked at these conditions, Washington ostracised Hamas politically and financially and pressured Abbas to refuse Hamas' initial invitation to form a national unity government.²² Riyadh, on its part, sought to sideline Iran in the West Bank and Gaza Strip by hosting reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah. However the subsequent Mecca Agreement of 8 February 2007 proved stillborn, and failed to bring the two parties together in a national unity government. Washington was nevertheless determined to deny Hamas the privilege of assuming power in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It consequently stealthily armed and trained Fatah fighters led by Mohammed Dahlan in preparation for a putsch against Hamas in Gaza.²³ Hamas pre-empted the putsch in June 2007, defeated the Fatah fighters in bloody street fighting between the two groups, and cemented its position in the Gaza Strip as well as the regional positions of its regional allies, namely Iran and Syria.

Syria

Syria was at the heart of Saudi Arabia's strategy to contain Iran's growing influence in the region. Like Washington, Riyadh viewed Damascus as the umbilical land cord linking Tehran to Hezbollah and Hamas, and the bridge that allows Iran to project its political power in the region and its material capabilities along Israel's borders. Moreover, Iran's alliance with Syria provided Tehran political cover for its growing influence and interference in what Riyadh viewed as otherwise strictly Arab affairs. Riyadh also clashed with Syria over Lebanon and the best manner to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict: whereas the former viewed the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative as the means to do so based on full normalisation of relations with Israel in exchange for full Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders and a just settlement of the Palestinian refugee crisis based on UNSCR 194, the latter favoured supporting armed resistance groups as a deterrence to Israel's military preponderance, an asset in its own regional strategy, and a tactic to lure Israel into accepting the Arab position in a prospective negotiated settlement.²⁴ Consequently, Riyadh was determined to challenge Syria's influence in every Arab nook and cranny in an attempt to punish it for its alliance with Iran and compel it to distance itself from what

²²See R. McCarthy and I. Williams, "Secret UN Report Condemns US for Middle East Failures", *The Guardian*, 13 June 2007.

²³See A. Abunimah, "A Setback for the Bush Doctrine in Gaza", *The Electronic Intifada*, 14 June 2007, <http://electronicintifada.net/content/setback-bush-doctrine-gaza/7006>; and Rose, "The Gaza Bombshell", <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/04/gaza200804>.

²⁴See the text of the Arab Peace Initiative: <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/league/peace02.htm>.

was developing under Bashar al-Assad into a very close but unbalanced relationship with Tehran. This was especially true in Lebanon, Syria's own security backyard and the arena from which Damascus traditionally sought to project its own regional power.²⁵

Riyadh was quick to accuse Damascus of standing behind the Hariri assassination and pressured it to withdraw its troops swiftly from Lebanon and desist from interfering in its neighbour's domestic politics.²⁶ On its part, Damascus accused Riyadh of interfering in its own security arena and domestic politics by financing Salafi groups and jihadi cells in Lebanon and Syria, and by fomenting sectarian sentiments against the Syrian and Iranian regimes in regional organisations.²⁷ Riyadh's strategy to ostracise Syria reached a zenith in the preparations for the March 2008 regular Arab summit in Damascus. Both Riyadh and Cairo lobbied hard to postpone the summit.²⁸ Having failed to do so, Riyadh and Washington pressured allied Arab states to downgrade their representation to the summit; Riyadh sent its envoy to the Arab League to represent the kingdom, a diplomatic snub that did not pass unnoticed by the summit's hosts.

This Saudi-Syrian confrontation came to a temporary halt only after Qatar succeeded in negotiating the 21 May 2008 Doha Accord which ended Lebanon's political stalemate and the crisis following Hezbollah's military takeover of Beirut, paving the way for the election of a consensus presidential candidate, army commander General Michel Suleiman, on 25 May 2008, and the formation of a national unity government on 11 July 2008. Qatar's success in negotiating the Doha Accord underscored the dynamic regional role it assumed during this period. Situating itself between the two regional camps, Doha deployed its financial and diplomatic assets to mediate multiple inter-Arab conflicts, whether between Syria and Saudi Arabia, Iran and the other Gulf states, or between competing groups in Sudan, Yemen, Lebanon, or the West Bank and Gaza Strip; it cultivated strategic ties with Washington and served as a base for the US Fifth Fleet; hosted Salafi outcasts but also used Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi and the Al Jazeera satellite channel to, respectively, control the Muslim Brotherhood's ideological production and co-opt mainstream Islamist popular sentiments; and, finally, it boasted open relations with Israel.²⁹ Qatar's unorthodox foreign policy mix of balancing, bandwagoning, co-optation and accommodation aimed at insulating the small sheikhdom from the multiple regional threats it faced in its immediate security environment.

²⁵See N. Nassif, "Al-'Ilaqat al-Amerkiya-al-Sa'oudiya: Talaqen 'ala Talqin Suriya Darsan", *al-Akbbar*, 7 April 2008.

²⁶For a discussion, see Salloukh, "Demystifying Syrian Foreign Policy".

²⁷See J. 'Aziz, "I'lan Dimashq: Ma Lam Yuktab fih Akhtar", *al-Akbbar*, 1 April 2008.

²⁸See I. al-Amin, "Waqa'e' min al-Hamla al-Sa'oudiya al-Masriya li-Ifshal al-Qima", *al-Akbbar*, 2 April 2008.

²⁹See Kamrava, "Mediation and Qatari Foreign Policy"; and Rabi, "Qatar's Relations with Israel".

Turkey also emerged in this period as balancer of inter-Arab and Middle East relations. It distanced itself from Riyadh's use of sectarian means in pursuit of geopolitical ends, situating itself geopolitically between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran, thus offering the region a potentially alternative model of political Islam in power. Turkish officials shuttled between Syria and Egypt in an attempt to reconcile their differences over Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, and Ankara replaced Cairo's traditional role as mediator between Syria and Israel, Syria and the PA, and Israel and the PA.³⁰ Consequently, the geopolitical regional shift from an Arab state system to a Middle Eastern one – a project floated after the 1990-91 invasion and concomitant liberation of Kuwait, but pursued more aggressively after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq – appeared unquestionable on the eve of the Arab uprisings. Henceforth the dynamics of inter-Arab relations seemed inseparable from the interests and actions of non-Arab states. Iran, Turkey, but also Israel assumed central roles in inter-Arab dynamics and alignments.

Popular uprisings as geopolitics

The uprisings' deafening cry "*Al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*" (people want to overthrow the regime) resonated across the Arab world as authoritarian regimes braced themselves for a wave of popular protests.³¹ Some of them even temporarily shelved their geopolitical differences as they engaged in authoritarian solidarity, a phenomenon best expressed in Syria's endorsement of Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Bahrain to squash violently what commenced as an amicable and trans-sectarian popular uprising against the ruling Al Khalifa monarchy. Yet by the time this wave passed its zenith, and Saudi Arabia felt somewhat immune from the threat of popular uprisings, the region's geopolitical battles resumed, and the uprisings became part of the repertoire of these battles.³²

Saudi Arabia's stance vis-à-vis the popular uprisings was shaped by its own very realist geopolitical objectives: to insulate the kingdom from the winds of the Arab Spring, protect the survival of monarchical regimes, and undermine Iran's power in the region. It thus used its military forces, financial largess, and political clout to contain the effects of the uprisings on the Arabian Peninsula, but especially in Bahrain, Yemen and Oman. Riyadh also extended financial assistance to buttress the monarchies of Morocco and Jordan against mounting domestic calls for reform. While it allowed Qatar to lead the charge for regime change in Libya, it later appropriated the Arab League and rallied the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in its battle to overthrow the

³⁰See J. al-Zayn, "Turkiya al-Sa'ida ka Mi'dala lil-Gharb ... wa ka Mi'dala lil-'Arab", *al-Nahar*, 28 January 2009.

³¹See Brynen, Moore, Salloukh and Zahar, *Beyond the Arab Spring*.

³²See Nerguizian, *U.S.-Iranian Competition*.

Syrian regime. Riyadh's use of sectarianism as an instrument of regional policy became even more pronounced than in the pre-uprising period. It manipulated Sunni-Shia divisions and sentiments to shore up support for its regional allies and isolate Iran and its Arab allies.³³ Riyadh justified its intervention in Bahrain's uprising by characterising the latter as the work of Iran's Shia agents in the Gulf. It clamped down harshly on opposition in the kingdom's Eastern Province, labelling the demonstrators Iranian – read Shia – agents. Riyadh supported sectarian opposition against Iraq's pro-Iranian Maliki government and the Hezbollah-allied government of Najib Mikati in Lebanon, and accused Tehran of meddling in the kingdom's security backyard by supporting and arming Shia Hawthi rebels in northern Yemen. However nowhere was Riyadh's sectarian tactics more evident than in Syria, whose alliance with Iran it was determined to end.³⁴

The Syrian uprising, which commenced as a peaceful protest movement for political reforms and social justice, soon avalanched into a sectarian civil war instigated primarily by the regime. Under the pretext of supporting the democratic aspirations of the Syrian peoples, Riyadh used the uprising to settle geopolitical scores with and try to topple Bashar's regime. Riyadh's determination to reorient Syria away from 'the axis of resistance' toward the Saudi-US camp developed into an overlapping regional-international geopolitical contest pitting Saudi Arabia, the US, France, Turkey, Qatar and Saad al-Hariri's Future Movement against Iran, Russia, China and Hezbollah. The struggle over Syria now assumed open sectarian connotations, one aimed at toppling an Alawi regime and replacing it with a Sunni protégé.³⁵ In Riyadh's geopolitical calculations, control over a post-Baath Sunni-dominated Syria was fair compensation for its loss of Sunni-ruled Iraq to Iran.³⁶ Toward this end, Riyadh financed and supported Free Syrian Army groups and turned a blind eye to Salafi calls, sometimes aired from the kingdom's own Salafi satellite channels, for the mobilisation of Salafi-jihadi fighters into the Syrian battlefield.³⁷ This inadvertently allowed the al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (Support Front for the Peoples of Greater Syria) to play an inordinate role in the battle for Syria. To Washington and Riyadh's displeasure Jabhat al-Nusra soon emerged as the best organised fighting machine in northern Syria, possessing its own fundamentalist religious and cultural agenda for post-Bashar Syria, and

³³See Gause, *Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East*, 21. The Saudi-owned daily newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and the satellite news channel, Al Arabiya, played an instrumental role in anti-Iranian and anti-Shia agitation.

³⁴For the Saudi perspective, see A. R. al-Rashed, "Awn wa Berri wa Inqaz al-Asad", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 17 November 2011.

³⁵See International Crisis Group, *Tentative Jihad*.

³⁶See Luttwak, "Revenge of the Sunnis", http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/12/07/revenge_of_the_sunnis.

³⁷Most notably by Syrian Salafi Sheikh Adnan al-'Arour who resided in Saudi Arabia and used Saudi-based Salafi satellite channels to propagate his anti-Alawi sectarian discourse.

competing with and overshadowing the more nationalist local military groups.³⁸ Its public and grisly executions of pro-regime fighters, suicide attacks in densely populated areas, and virulent sectarian discourse against Syria's Alawi community and the Shia,³⁹ has contributed to the hardening of communal sentiments in the region and rendered the Syrian uprising, in part at least, a bloody Sunni-Alawi sectarian conflict. Sectarian massacres and mass executions, on both sides of the divide, have shattered Syria's national unity, turning the country, like Lebanon after 1976, into a playground for grander geopolitical battles.

Syria's swift transformation from a one-time regional player, commanding substantial influence in its immediate security environment, into terrain for geopolitical battles is one of the major geopolitical consequences of the Arab uprisings. But the Syrian regime is paying the price of its authoritarian choices and past mistakes, namely its participation in the 1991 US-led liberation of Kuwait, then a defensive realist choice to balance against the threat emanating from Saddam's Iraq, but one that nevertheless created a precedent for the later use of the Arab League to legitimise external invasion – as in Libya's case – or intervention in the domestic affairs of member states.

The Arab uprisings also altered Qatar and Turkey's systemic roles. Both states abandoned their former pragmatic stances and jumped on the uprisings' bandwagon to carve new regional roles for themselves. Qatar used its affiliations with the Muslim Brotherhood to co-opt Islamist parties that assumed power after authoritarian regime breakdown in a bid to bolster its geopolitical weight. The small sheikhdom played a proactive role in regime change in Egypt and Libya, shelved its former differences with Riyadh and openly endorsed regime change in Syria, offering Islamist rebels, but especially the Muslim Brotherhood, military and material aid; it led an Arab League campaign to ostracise Damascus and expel it from Arab organisations, threatened to apply the full weight of the UN Charter's Chapter VII against the regime, successfully engineered Hamas' exit from the Iranian-Syrian alliance, and emerged as a proxy for NATO and Washington in their efforts to contain Iran.⁴⁰ Later, Doha embraced the politically beleaguered and fiscally crippled Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt. Al Jazeera played an instrumental role popularising and defending the Muslim Brotherhood's position in the contest between Islamist and secular groups over the drafting of a new constitution. In January 2013, in a clear show of support to President Mohamed Morsi, Doha committed USD18 billion for a joint Qatari-Egyptian economic project, and raised its deposits in Egypt's central bank from USD2.5 to USD4 billion, triggering speculation in Cairo regarding Qatar's political and commercial interests in the country.⁴¹

³⁸See Martin Chulov, "Syria Crisis: al-Qaida Fighters Revealing their True Colours, Rebels Say", *The Guardian*, 17 January 2013.

³⁹<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfiXuVS66d8>.

⁴⁰See M. al-Labbad, "Qatar: Ahlam Kabira wa Qudarat Mahdouda", *al-Safir*, 30 July and 6 August 2012.

⁴¹See M.H. Abeh, "Maza Turid Qatar min Misr?", *al-Safir*, 10 January 2013.

Turkey's role in the region also changed after the uprisings. Its stance vis-à-vis Syria mutated from being a close ally of Bashar's regime, mediating between Damascus and Tel Aviv, shielding it from Riyadh's sectarian accusations at its moment of peril immediately after the Hariri assassination, and using Damascus as a bridge to establish its own geopolitical influence in the Arab world, to a potential mediator between the regime and the opposition in the early stages of the Syrian uprising, then an open critic of the regime's violent handling of the Syrian uprising, and finally to Riyadh and Doha's active ally in their determination to topple the regime at any cost. In fact, Turkey emerged as the mouthpiece of a helpless Arab League, instigating Arab states to boycott Syria and sanction it economically. In so doing, Ankara failed to chart for itself a third way distinct from Riyadh's uncompromising opposition to Bashar's regime and Tehran's unwavering support for it, one that would have dampened the sectarian transformation of the Syrian crisis. Turkey consequently lost much of the soft power it possessed in the Arab world before the uprisings.

Conclusion

The Arab uprisings intensified the geopolitical battles unleashed by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, and extended them to new theatres. Intra-Arab battles assumed a new urgency and grew bloodier and more intense. Faced with the pressures of a regional order in crisis, the Arab League outsourced its responsibilities to NATO and the UN, inviting them to topple Arab regimes or interfere in their domestic affairs, thus negating yet again its very *raison d'être* as an institution responsible for collective Arab action and security. Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad, the erstwhile epicentres of the region's geopolitical battles are undergoing, respectively, complicated transitions, civil wars, and vivisection along ethnic and sectarian divides. This has allowed the otherwise foreign policy-conservative Gulf monarchies, led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to fill the geopolitical vacuum and omnibalance against both external and domestic threats to their security.⁴² The old pan-national ideological slogans that shaped the Arab Cold War between Nasser's Cairo and his monarchical rivals are replaced by a ruthless sectarianism wreaking havoc in many Arab states.⁴³

Deploying sectarianism and the uprisings for realist geopolitical objectives threatens to trigger a blowback regional effect, however. For example, and in an effort to counter Jabhat al-Nusra's growing power in northern Syria, Riyadh decided in December 2012 to beef up its military supplies to the nationalist and moderate units of the Free Syrian Army in the south of the country, purposefully bypassing

⁴²See Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War".

⁴³See A. A. Khalil, "Jamal Abdel Nasser: I'adat Taqweem", *al-Akhhbar*, 12 November 2011.

Jihadi-Salafi units.⁴⁴ Moreover, Qatar's quest to ring itself with a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated sphere of influence in the region has unnerved other Gulf monarchies, but especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These monarchies are apprehensive of the Muslim Brotherhood's growing ideological allure among their own publics. Dubai's Police Force Chief, Lieutenant General Dahi Khalfan Tamim, did not mince words when he accused the Muslim Brotherhood of conspiring, with financial help from Qatar, to assume power in a number of Gulf countries. These monarchies fear that past alliances with the religious establishments of their countries, ones that have hitherto served to buttress their authoritarian regimes, may be overtaken by a politicised brand of religious preaching more receptive to the kind of electoral politics that brought the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda Party to power in Egypt and Tunisia respectively. They also feel threatened by a nascent new tripartite regional alliance bringing together Qatar, Turkey and Egypt, one that combines financial, military and demographic power with the Islamist ideology, transnational permeability and organisational skills of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁵

The sectarianisation of the region's geopolitical battles, a process that commenced in earnest following the US invasion of Iraq,⁴⁶ but reached fruition after the Arab uprisings, has also had a spillover effect on the domestic politics of a number of Arab states. Qatar's embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood and Riyadh's support for Salafis emboldened these groups against their secular counterparts. In Tunisia, tensions across the religious-secular divide culminated in the assassination of the secularist opposition leader Chokri Belaid in February 2013. Qatari-Saudi differences over the Muslim Brotherhood menace have also translated into Muslim Brotherhood-Salafi rifts, most visibly in Egypt between the Freedom and Justice Party and the al-Nour Party. These domestic fallouts of the region's geopolitical dynamics are bound to complicate post-authoritarian democratic transitions in Tunisia and Egypt. Moreover, the sectarianisation of the geopolitical struggle over Syria, alongside the regime's brutality, has altered its uprising from a peaceful quest for democratic reforms to a civil war that has ruptured the country's national unity.

To be sure, short of a grand bargain involving regional and international actors, the geopolitical battles of the Middle East will persist with terrible consequences for the peoples and states of the region. As for those who braved ostensibly unchallengeable autocrats in pursuit of a new democratic Arab order, the spring of their aspirations remains deferred as they battle against old authoritarian regimes, new exclusionary Islamist parties supported by powerful patrons, and the cold geopolitical calculations of regional and international powers.

⁴⁴See L. Sly and K. DeYoung, "In Syria, New Influx of Weapons to Rebels Tilts the Battle Against Assad", *Washington Post*, 24 February 2013; and C. J. Chivers and E. Schmitt, "Saudis Step up Help for Rebels in Syria with Croatian Arms", *New York Times*, 25 February 2013.

⁴⁵See A. B. Atwan, "Al-Harb 'ala al-Ukhwan Tashuqu al-Khaleej", *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 11 January 2013.

⁴⁶See Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise", 58-74; and the critique in Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest*.

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