

## **MIDDLE EAST COLD WARS: A Structural Analysis and Estimate**

by

(b)(6)

(b)(6) USA

NIU Class 2022

Submitted to the faculty of the  
National Intelligence University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science of Strategic Intelligence

July 2022

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Thesis Accepted on Behalf of the National Intelligence University

Thesis Submitted by:

(b)(6)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(b)(6) (sign above line)

(b)(6); (b)(3)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(b)(6); (b)(3) Thesis Advisor and Chair

(b)(6); (b)(3)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(b) (3), (b) (6) PhD, Reader and Committee Member

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**ABSTRACT**

**TITLE OF THESIS:** MIDDLE EAST COLD WARS: A Structural Analysis and Estimate

**STUDENT:** (b)(6) MSSI, 2022

**CLASS NUMBER:** NIU 2022      **DATE:** July 2022

**THESIS COMMITTEE CHAIR:** (b) (3), (b) (6)

**COMMITTEE MEMBER:** (b) (3), (b) (6)

“What are the existing and emerging major geopolitical struggles, or “cold wars,” of the broader Middle East, and what is their likely trajectory over the next 10 years?” This thesis takes that subject as its object of inquiry.

The broader Middle East and North Africa region is plagued by at least four meta-conflicts. The larger power-nodes in the region—Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—often align loosely with others to form blocs that compete with other blocs, or, function individually to compete with other individual states or blocs. The object of these non-violent or proxy struggles varies across the range of political, religious, ethnic, and economic interests. Further complicating this matter is the involvement of major powers, such as the United States, Russia, and now China who back different regional powers in these often-shifting alignments.

Chapter 1 will review the literature on the various regional major geopolitical struggles and their conceptualizations. This will be done topically to demonstrate the need to examine the individual conditions of emergence and the persistence of each cold war. The last part of the chapter will explain the methodology or approach, outlining a broad interpretive sociological analytic framework of structures, agency and events to be examined in each of the many cold wars, with the chapter summary below serving as the broader organization.

Chapter 2 examines the present and transitioning Arab-Israeli cold war. A brief exploration of the conflict’s more contemporary structures since the 2006 election, which vaulted Hamas to power in Gaza, will serve as the foundation in illuminating five fundamental issues

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fueling the Arab-Israeli cold war. First, there is the intractable, irreconcilable, religious and political narrative dividing Hamas and other resistance-minded Palestinians from farther-Right Israelis, especially the Settler movement. Second, there is the entrenchment of Hamas in Gaza, and the ability of Iran to provide it with rockets that terrorize Southern Israeli villages. Third, there is the useful role this cold war plays in Iran and Turkey's struggle for leadership of the Middle East. Fourth, there is the growing resentment and resistance movement among Palestinian-Israelis, or Palestinian citizens of Israel. Fifth, there is the shifting public opinion in the United States and globally, which creates more solidarity with the Palestinians.

Chapter 3 examines and describes the present and emerging dynamics of the meta-conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which has spilled over into proxy wars in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Pakistan. This part will analyze the following structures that are shaping this conflict's trajectory: (1) the existential need for each irreconcilable model of Islamic governance to wholly delegitimize the other, thereby creating a win-lose conflict paradigm; (2) the rise of the Salafist doctrine of *takfirism* as part of Saudi Arabia's strategy to religiously delegitimize the Iranian regime; (3) the accelerating arms race and its capacity to move the cold war closer to a ground war; (4) and the economic disparity between Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as other economic factors driving the conflict.

Chapter 4 examines and describes the present and emerging structure of the cold war between the region's Islamist movements and their state sponsors, versus the reactionary monarchical and military dictatorship regimes. This chapter will analyze the following dynamics and their trends: (1) the ideational power of Islamist groups willing to engage in a democratic process and the support these groups have among Muslim populations across the region and worldwide; (2) the basis for Turkey and Qatar's support to the Islamist movements and how their support threatens the predominant monarchical regimes of Saudi Arabia, UAE, and the military dictatorship in Egypt; and (3) the anti-Islamist regimes' security strategies to demobilize political Islamist movements and to delegitimize their state backers of Turkey and Qatar, amidst challenges from their own citizens and global investors for expanded human rights and better governance.

Chapter 5 analyzes the structural and strategic elements of Turkey's more hegemonic geopolitical Middle East turn, and how its neo-Ottomanism creates strategic reactions that add to the inherent religious and economic clashes with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The intersectionality between this regional rivalry and the cold war against the political Islamist movements will then be annotated.

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The conclusion attempts to add further value with new strategic insights that only this kind of holistic analysis can provide.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

While I have many people to thank for helping me accomplish this educational milestone, I owe my gratitude most of all to my sweet wife. I may not have pursued this challenging degree without your encouragement, and I certainly would not have been able to complete it without your many sacrifices over the last two years. Thank you for putting up with the late nights, early mornings, missed dates, and short weekends. I dedicate this thesis to you.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“What are the existing and emerging major geopolitical struggles, or “cold wars,” of the broader Middle East, and what is their likely trajectory over the next 10 years?” This thesis takes that subject as its object of inquiry.

The broader Middle East and North Africa region is plagued by at least four meta-conflicts. The larger power-nodes in the region—Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—often align loosely with others to form blocs that compete with other blocs, or, function individually to compete with other individual states or blocs. The object of these non-violent or proxy struggles varies across the range of political, religious, ethnic, and economic interests. Further complicating this matter is the involvement of major powers, such as the United States, Russia, and now China who back different regional powers in these often-shifting alignments.

The main goal of this research is to describe the structure of the broad array of emerging geopolitical struggles in Middle East, and estimate their likely trajectories over the course of the next decade.

#### *Strategic Relevance*

This research question is strategically important to the national security community and to the U.S. intelligence mission for several reasons.

First, the meta-conflicts or macro-level cold wars that continue to play out in the Middle East will have significant strategic implications for U.S. security interests even in an era of increased focus on China and Russia. Although the Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry, the U.S.-Iran cold war, and the Arab-Israeli conflict feature prominently in this thesis, examination of the less well-known geopolitical conflicts complete the complex mosaic.

Second, the global economy and therefore its security depends on the unobstructed flow of Middle East energy resources. Negative outcomes for nearly every one of these cold wars could disrupt access to the region's oil and natural gas production and distribution, which will be necessary even after the global economy has begun the energy transition to renewables. This could result in a potential global energy crisis and an economic crisis that transcends the region.

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Third, world powers such as Russia and China continue to exploit the opportunities inherent to these cold wars, seeking to expand their foothold in the Middle East and to drive out Western influence. Russia's ideological motives and China's economic objectives add an additional layer of complexity and tension to the region. The successful integration of these countries' respective visions increases their soft and hard power in the geopolitics of the Middle East and on the world stage. Grasping these many geopolitical conflicts holistically will help craft more efficacious grand strategy or foreign policy.

Finally, the four cold wars discussed in this thesis have never been aggregated together in a single study to expose their effects on one another and to determine any commonalities among them at their most foundational levels. In doing this, I seek to provide critical insight into modern conflicts and relationships in MENA that will, in turn, equip the national security community with the context and understanding needed to make foreign policy decisions.

### **Literature Review**

The literature related to the existing and emerging cold wars in the Middle East is vast but sporadic. To date, there are no major works that consolidate the several Middle East cold wars, let alone the four major cold wars analyzed in this thesis. Further, there are few works that view these macro-level conflicts through a "cold war" lens. There are, however, several notable works that capture the issues of the individual cold wars, or point towards them, and warrant examination. For that reason, this selective literature review will be arranged topically by cold war to highlight some of the most relevant texts that most closely align with the stated objective of this thesis.

#### The Arab-Israeli Cold War

The Abraham Accords peace agreement signed by the state of Israel, UAE and Bahrain in September 2020 denotes the latest shift in the seven decades long cold war between the state of Israel and its Arab neighbors. Beyond the news coverage of the accords and the public statements of world leaders (discussed at a later point), little scholarship has emerged in the short period since its signing. In general, however, scholarship points to improved relations between the Jewish state and its Muslim neighbors due to a growing number of shared interests. Two sources outline this trend below.

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While the May 2021 armed conflict between Israel and Hamas demonstrated that the Palestinian issue remains unresolved despite any shared interests between Israel and the Arab states, the weak Arab response to the clashes also proved the durability of the Accords. Once again, the event's recentness precludes available scholarship that explains the armed conflict's impact on Arab-Israeli relations or the Palestinian issue, but two sources will be used to establish a baseline for Hamas' security apparatus in the Gaza Strip and to demonstrate the political divisions between Fatah and Hamas prior to the most recent developments in Palestine.

Finally, one additional important element of this broader conflict is the Palestinian-Israeli (or Arab-Israeli) protest movement among Palestinian citizens of Israel structured similarly to the U.S.-based Black Lives Matter movement. The killing of Palestinian Eyad Al-Hallaq by Israeli Border Police in East Jerusalem in May 2020 happened just five days after the murder of African American George Floyd in the United States that initiated nationwide mass-demonstrations. Dr. Ronit Lentin explores the similar and different reactions to the respective murders below and offers a fresh perspective on the relationship between race and Israeli settler-colonialism.

*Zoltan Barany's (2021) "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel: From Aversion to Pragmatism"*

Zoltan Barany (2021), Centennial Professor of Government at the University of Texas, argued four main reasons for the Gulf monarchies' improved relationship with the Israelis in recent years.<sup>1</sup> These four reasons include "alignment of geopolitical interests against Iran, failings of American Middle East policy, recognition of the potential economic benefits of détente, and attitudinal shifts about the Palestinian cause."<sup>2</sup>

Shared concerns over increasing Iranian influence in the Middle East opened a channel for cooperation between the region's most advanced military power (Israel) and several Gulf monarchies.<sup>3</sup> Barany attests that the Obama administration's 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, i.e., Iran nuclear deal) paradoxically unified Israel and some of its Arab

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<sup>1</sup> Zoltan Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel: From Aversion to Pragmatism," *Middle East Journal* 74, no. 4 (Winter 2020-21): 559–578, <https://doi.org/10.3751/74.4.14>.

<sup>2</sup> Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel," 559.

<sup>3</sup> Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel," 564.

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neighbors due only to their shared opposition to Obama's policy on Iran.<sup>4</sup> Thus, when the Trump administration reversed this policy under his "maximum pressure" campaign in 2018, the Israelis and Gulf leaders rejoiced.<sup>5</sup> Israel capitalized on this new relationship, selling its superior weapons, equipment, and intelligence to the Saudis, who benefited in using these resources.<sup>6</sup>

A hindrance to further improving relations between the Jewish state and the remaining Gulf monarchies, according to Barany, are the disparities in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries' foreign policies.<sup>7</sup> This is especially true in attitudes toward Iran, as Gulf states other than Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have working relationships with the Islamic Republic.<sup>8</sup> Kuwait, the UAE, Oman, and Qatar all have political or economic ties to Iran.<sup>9</sup> Of these states, the UAE is the only state that has managed to secure formal diplomatic relations with both Iran and Iran's archenemy, Israel. Iran aside, each Gulf state has mixed relations with Israel for other reasons. Qatar's support of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is incompatible with the Saudis' and Emirates' labeling of the MB as a terrorist organization, though Qatar has managed to parlay its support for Hamas into a valuable diplomatic channel for Israel to message the group.<sup>10</sup> Kuwait remains outwardly loyal to the Palestinian cause, due to domestic political pressures surrounding the parliament and elections in Kuwait.<sup>11</sup>

Growing frustrations over the lack of progress in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict steer rising Gulf leaders such as Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) of Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayid Al Nahyan (MbZ) of the UAE to reprioritize their commitment to the Palestinian cause.<sup>12</sup> As discussed previously, the persistent threat of Iran has become the unifying factor for cooperation between the Jews and Gulf leadership. Both princes

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<sup>4</sup> Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel," 564-565.

<sup>5</sup> Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel," 565.

<sup>6</sup> Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel," 566.

<sup>7</sup> Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel," 560.

<sup>8</sup> Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel," 567.

<sup>9</sup> Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel," 567.

<sup>10</sup> Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel," 568.

<sup>11</sup> Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel," 563.

<sup>12</sup> Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel," 572.

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have publicly stated Israel's value in combating Iran, moving the Palestinian cause lower on the list of priorities.<sup>13</sup> As Barany notes, this change in attitude starkly contrasts with Saudi King Salman—who champions the Palestinian cause—and Kuwaiti leaders who oppose anything short of a two-state agreement and the relinquishment of Israeli occupied territory.<sup>14</sup>

Notably absent from Barany's work is any mention of Israel's and the Arab monarchies' fear of a unification between Fatah and the Muslim Brotherhood Hamas. Should the Fatah-Hamas dispute be reconciled, the Muslim Brotherhood Hamas—who the Arab monarchs deem to be a terrorist organization—would sit at the heart of a democratic Palestine. Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt must constantly calculate which reality they fear more: an unrealized Palestinian state or a realized Palestinian democracy potentially governed by an enemy.

*Jones and Guzansky's (2020) Fraternal Enemies: Israel and the Gulf Monarchies*

Clive Jones, Professor of Regional Security at Durham University, and Yoel Guzansky, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University (2020), track the development of a “tacit security regime (TSR)” between Israel and Gulf states designed to combat Iran, and what it means for the future of the Arab-Israeli conflict. They contend that the Arab Uprisings and the deepening of sectarian politics reshaped the elite Arab monarch's attitudes towards Israel, and served as the foundation of the TSR.<sup>15</sup> Further, Israel and the Gulf states' near-unified opposition to the 2015 JCPOA solidified this loose and informal alliance, where the Arab states relied on Israel not just for its military strength, but also on its perceived influence in Washington should Iran become a greater threat.<sup>16</sup>

The Palestinians lose in this makeshift tacit security regime. Jones and Guzansky observe that Israel has the ability to leverage its technological expertise, superior medicine and agricultural practices, military supremacy, and role as a potential “gatekeeper” to the White House.<sup>17</sup> In an uneven quid pro quo, Israel does not need to make concessions on the Palestinian

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<sup>13</sup> Barany, “The Gulf Monarchies and Israel,” 572.

<sup>14</sup> Barany, “The Gulf Monarchies and Israel,” 573-574.

<sup>15</sup> Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies: Israel and the Gulf Monarchies* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 43-44.

<sup>16</sup> Jones and Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies*, 44, 119-120.

<sup>17</sup> Jones and Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies*, 114.

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issue so long as Iran is perceived as the regime's greatest enemy.<sup>18</sup> The noticeably muted responses from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE to the U.S. embassy move to Jerusalem is a telling example of the Palestinian issue being pushed to the sidelines.<sup>19</sup> Jones and Guzansky add, however, that although Palestine may have moved down on the list of priorities, it continues to play a part: "Classical realism would suggest that, at the very least, a formal alliance between Israel and at least three of the Gulf monarchies, conditioned by a shared view of Iran as a malign regional actor, would likely emerge. That is has failed to do so speaks volumes for the continued hold that Palestine continues to exercise over the collective Arab conscience."<sup>20</sup> The authors conclude that relations within the tacit security regime will continue to strengthen over perceived U.S. diplomatic and military withdrawal from the region.<sup>21</sup> They further contend that if other states also perceive a waning U.S. presence in the MENA region, the tacit security regime may serve as a "template for understanding shifts in alliances and regional security systems, across the wider Middle East, Norther Africa and beyond."<sup>22</sup>

*Benedetta Berti & Beatriz Gutiérrez's (2016) "Rebel-to-political and back? Hamas as a security provider in Gaza between rebellion, politics and governance"*

Dr. Benedetta Berti, fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies, and Dr. Beatriz Gutiérrez, former researcher for Peace and International Security Studies at University Institute General Gutiérrez Mellado, assess Hamas' balancing act as both the security provider of the Gaza Strip and the makeshift governing apparatus there. Specifically, the authors argue that non-state armed groups like Hamas provide quasi-state security as a means to legitimize their governance and institutions.<sup>23</sup> After falling out with Fatah and seizing control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, Hamas transitioned from being mostly a resistance movement that prioritized

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<sup>18</sup> Jones and Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies*, 196.

<sup>19</sup> Jones and Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies*, 117, 200.

<sup>20</sup> Jones and Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies*, 200-201.

<sup>21</sup> Jones and Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies*, 196.

<sup>22</sup> Jones and Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies*, 204.

<sup>23</sup> Benedetta Berti and Beatriz Gutiérrez, "Rebel-to-political and back? Hamas as a security provider in Gaza between rebellion, politics and governance," *Democratization* 23, no. 6 (2016): 1061, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1170008>.

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confrontation with Israel into a quasi-government seeking to consolidate and legitimize its control of the Strip.<sup>24</sup> Hamas pursued these objectives by remodeling the Qassam Brigades to mirror that of Hizballah's (organized military divisions with both offensive and defensive missions), and establishing an internal security service to police crime within Gaza.<sup>25</sup>

The authors secondly analyze how Hamas has fared in providing security to Gaza using four parameters to measure: "monopoly on the use of force; effectiveness of the security sector in providing security; level of professionalism and de-politicization and existence of clearly defined roles, rules, procedures and mandates; adherence to the rule of law, predictability in administering law-enforcement and justice (fairness) as well as transparency, accountability and clear oversight."<sup>26</sup> Berti and Gutiérrez conclude that Hamas' predicament as both a "resistance" movement and a government actor complicates its ability to monopolize the use of force and its ability to distinguish between its external military force from its internal security forces.<sup>27</sup> The Qassam Brigades are technically an autonomous military group operating in Gaza but have at times quelled riots or carried out police work normally reserved for domestic law enforcement.<sup>28</sup> The blending of external military duties with that of local law enforcement also thwarts any efforts to maintain a bi-partisan or apolitical workforce. Instead, post-2007 practice has been to appoint resistance-movement sympathizers into key leadership positions in all branches of government.<sup>29</sup> Finally, Hamas' current security sector structure shirks accountability and transparency by repressing internal opposition to Hamas by way of numerous human rights violations and under the guise of anti-crime campaigns.<sup>30</sup>

Ultimately, Berti and Gutiérrez demonstrate that Hamas has deeply rooted itself into Gaza via a complicated security apparatus to legitimize its governance there. This article was

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<sup>24</sup> Berti and Gutiérrez, "Rebel-to-political and back?," 1062.

<sup>25</sup> Berti and Gutiérrez, "Rebel-to-political and back?," 1063-1065.

<sup>26</sup> Berti and Gutiérrez, "Rebel-to-political and back?," 1066.

<sup>27</sup> Berti and Gutiérrez, "Rebel-to-political and back?," 1070.

<sup>28</sup> Berti and Gutiérrez, "Rebel-to-political and back?," 1068, 1070.

<sup>29</sup> Berti and Gutiérrez, "Rebel-to-political and back?," 1069.

<sup>30</sup> Berti and Gutiérrez, "Rebel-to-political and back?," 1069.

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written not long after the 2014 Gaza War (Operation Protective Edge), which was the last major conflict between Israel and Hamas prior to the May 2021 engagement.

*Abdalahdi Alija's (2019) "Political Division and Social Destruction: Generalized Trust in Palestine"*

Abdalahdi Alija, Research Associate at the Varieties of Democracy Institute at Gothenburg University, identified a correlation between the generalized level of trust in Palestine and the impact political divisions between Fatah and Hamas has on that level of trust. Using data from a statistically significant study done by the Arab Barometer in February 2016, Alija found that generalized trust (i.e., an individual's ability to trust another individual) in Palestine has declined since the 2007 split between Fatah and Hamas,<sup>31</sup> and that the levels of generalized trust directly correlate to the "political division characterized by corruption, poor public services, a partisan judiciary and legal system, as well as human rights violations."<sup>32</sup> This means that the less trust Palestinians had in their political institutions or government, the less generalized trust Palestinians had towards each other.

Alija additionally argues that the political split in June 2007 laid the foundation for a "hybrid society," where an otherwise homogenous ethnic or religious group begins defining political or culturally different groups as "other."<sup>33</sup> Put a different way, though most Palestinians share a common religion and ethnicity, affiliation with either a political party (Fatah or Hamas) or location (West Bank or Gaza) alienates one group from the other. This creates deepened polarization, and therefore less trust, resulting in the disunification of the Palestinian people.<sup>34</sup> Alija concludes that if unification of Palestine is to succeed, the hybrid society must first be

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<sup>31</sup> Abdalahdi Alija, "Political Division and Social Destruction," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 12, no. 2 (2019): 87.

<sup>32</sup> Alija, "Political Division and Social Destruction," 95.

<sup>33</sup> Alija, "Political Division and Social Destruction," 95.

<sup>34</sup> Alija, "Political Division and Social Destruction," 97-99.

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dismantled.<sup>35</sup> He argues that, “The Absence of trust between citizens usually creates a space for political parties to influence people through corrupt channels.”<sup>36</sup>

*Ronit Lentin’s (2020) “Palestinian Lives Matter: Racialising Israeli Settler-Colonialism”*

Dr. Ronit Lentin, retired Associate Professor of Sociology at Trinity College, theorizes Israeli rule over Palestine using three over-arching categories: Israel as a state of exception, a racial state, and a settler-colony.<sup>37</sup> Race is at the center of Lentin’s approach, specifically stating that “concepts of ethnicity, ethnocracy, ethnic cleansing, and racism” all fall short in describing Zionist ideology.<sup>38</sup> Instead, the Zionist ideology promotes ‘the Jewish race,’ “constructing a homogenous ‘Jewish people,’ with Jewish self- and other racialization....”<sup>39</sup> She further suggests that Zionists “used the persecution of the Jews as a justification for the racialisation of the Palestinians” and that modern Israel is “weaponising antisemitism in order to silence its critics....”<sup>40</sup>

A second theme of Lentin’s work includes emphasizing that the “Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” is not a conflict but a “colonisation.”<sup>41</sup> To demonstrate this, she argues the following point:

Israeli Jews, both Jewish Israeli citizens living within the state’s 1949 Armistice ‘green line’ borders and Jewish settlers in the West Bank and the Golan Heights, live at the expense of the Palestinian other(s). ... This is evident in the daily practices of exclusion and control employed by the Israeli occupation regime, including raids, arrests, checkpoints, curfews, house and village demolitions, administrative detention and the detention and torture of minors, population transfers and extra-judicial executions, all constituting an exceptional yet also routine settler-colonial racialised regime.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Alija, “Political Division and Social Destruction,” 100.

<sup>36</sup> Alija, “Political Division and Social Destruction,” 100.

<sup>37</sup>Ronit Lentin, “Palestinian Lives Matter: Racialising Israeli Settler-Colonialism,” *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies* 19, no. 2 (2020): 135.

<sup>38</sup> Lentin, “Palestinian Lives Matter,” 135.

<sup>39</sup> Lentin, “Palestinian Lives Matter,” 142.

<sup>40</sup> Lentin, “Palestinian Lives Matter,” 144.

<sup>41</sup> Lentin, “Palestinian Lives Matter,” 135-136.

<sup>42</sup> Lentin, “Palestinian Lives Matter,” 137.

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Lentin's evidence of Zionist settler-colonialism includes the Israeli practice of destroying Palestinian settlements and infrastructure and replacing it with Jewish settlements,<sup>43</sup> seen as early as the Nakba and continuing through the present day.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, Lentin begins and ends her analysis of race's impact on what she deems the "colonization of Palestine" by comparing the murders of African American George Floyd and Palestinian Eyad Al-Hallaq in May 2020. As both victims died unarmed, by law enforcement, and by a race historically oppressive to their own, Lentin cites Nofal's (2020) analysis stating that Palestinian activists analogize these deaths with Hallaq's case as a "clear example of the racist practices against them and the oppression they face only because they are Palestinians...."<sup>45</sup> While similar in circumstance, Lentin notes that Floyd's death rallied millions of Americans in anti-racist protests, but Al-Hallaq's death was mourned not because an Israeli killed a Palestinian, but because he was autistic. He was killed because of Israeli policy, not out of tragic circumstance.<sup>46</sup> Palestinians used the event to protest Israel's annexation plans under what Lentin argues should embrace the slogan "Palestinian Lives Matter."<sup>47</sup> Lentin's final remark summarizes her key argument regarding race: "The coupling of the slogans 'Black Lives Matter' and 'Palestinian Lives Matter' makes it increasingly obvious, despite denials and despite the impunity enjoyed by the State of Israel, why race still matters, and why Palestine is becoming a global issue."<sup>48</sup>

*Omar Bartov's (2019) "The Return of the Displaced: Ironies of the Jewish-Palestinian Nexus, 1939-49"*

Omer Bartov, Professor of History at Brown University, juxtaposes Zionism's early roots with the Palestinian *Nakba* to reveal "inextricable links between the fate of the Jews in Europe and the fate of Palestine's indigenous inhabitants."<sup>49</sup> At the core of Israeli-Palestinian issue,

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<sup>43</sup> Lentin, "Palestinian Lives Matter," 139.

<sup>44</sup> Lentin, "Palestinian Lives Matter," 140.

<sup>45</sup> Lentin, "Palestinian Lives Matter," 135.

<sup>46</sup> Lentin, "Palestinian Lives Matter," 146.

<sup>47</sup> Lentin, "Palestinian Lives Matter," 146.

<sup>48</sup> Lentin, "Palestinian Lives Matter," 146.

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according to Bartov, are the equally irreconcilable events of the Holocaust—which demonstrated the urgent Zionist need for a homeland—and the *Nakba* that ironically displaced millions of indigenous Arabs into a diaspora that the Jews just returned from, with no right of return.<sup>50</sup> Together, these two tragic events serve as the foundation for each entity’s respective political discourse and victim narratives that, in turn, are used to justify violent or unjust acts against the other.<sup>51</sup>

Bartov attempts to present the perspectives of both the returning Jews from the diaspora as well as of the indigenous Arabs between the years 1939–49. Of the Jews, Bartov writes,

The Jews who came to Palestine had been, as they saw it, displaced twice. One displacement had caused the diaspora; the second displacement uprooted them from the diaspora and brought them home. The encounter with the local Palestinian population had some similarities with their experiences in Europe. But in the minds of the immigrants, the relations were largely reversed. The land, after all, was theirs, and the people living on it could not possibly be anything more than a transitory population that had come from elsewhere and could just as easily continue on its journey to another site.<sup>52</sup>

While the Jews may not have expelled the majority of the Arab population purely out of spite for the Holocaust, Bartov argues that Jewish displacement “rendered many of them indifferent and callous and at times vengeful toward the Arab population they encountered in Palestine.”<sup>53</sup> The majority of Bartov’s article emphasizes this point.

The final piece of Bartov’s thesis is that the displacing events preceding and after the 1948 war continue to “gnaw” at the Jewish and Palestinian conscious.<sup>54</sup> The Jews are unable to truly feel at home whilst the international community questions the ethicality of sending millions of Palestinians into exile.<sup>55</sup> The Palestinian refugees refuse to assimilate into their new communities and demand to return to land that many Zionists deny ever belonged to the exiled

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<sup>49</sup> Omer Bartov, “The Return of the Displaced: Ironies of the Jewish-Palestinian Nexus, 1939–49,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 24, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2019): 28.

<sup>50</sup> Bartov, “The Return of the Displaced,” 28.

<sup>51</sup> Bartov, “The Return of the Displaced,” 29, 37.

<sup>52</sup> Bartov, “The Return of the Displaced,” 38.

<sup>53</sup> Bartov, “The Return of the Displaced,” 37, 39.

<sup>54</sup> Bartov, “The Return of the Displaced,” 41.

<sup>55</sup> Bartov, “The Return of the Displaced,” 40.

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Arabs to begin with.<sup>56</sup> While Bartov offers unique and valuable insights into the conflicting consciences of the Jews and Palestinians in this conflict, he does not offer a sophisticated solution to this problem-set. Instead, he proposes in his final sentence that the only way to end displacement in this conflict is to “bring in, ... dismantle the barriers,” and “to recognize that this land can be a home only when it is finally all its people’s homeland.”<sup>57</sup>

### The Saudi-Iranian Cold War

Exacerbated by the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has developed into arguably the most violent and prominent cold war in the region. Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen are only the latest victims of this cold war. The literature counters the popular frame that religious sectarianism is the main driver of the rivalry between these two countries.

*F. Gregory Gause III's (2014) "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War" and (2017) "Ideologies, Alignments, and Underbalancing in the New Middle East Cold War"*

F. Gregory Gause III (2014) was among the first to challenge the popular, unscholarly frame that sectarianism is the main driver of this geopolitical struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Some of Gause’s arguments against a sectarian motive include Riyadh and Tehran’s unwillingness to admit such a motive and the crossing of the “sectarian fault line in seeking regional allies.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, neither Saudi Arabia or Iran claim this rivalry to be sectarian in nature, and neither country appears to be limiting their alliances to sectarian alignments. Saudi enmity toward the Muslim Brotherhood (a Sunni movement), and Iran’s support of Hamas and other branches of the Muslim Brotherhood is strong evidence of this claim.<sup>59</sup> Gause concludes that if this rivalry truly had a sectarian motive, one would expect a coalition of Sunni states in opposition to Iran. Instead, “alignment patterns among the Sunni states are driven more by

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<sup>56</sup> Bartov, “The Return of the Displaced,” 40.

<sup>57</sup> Bartov, “The Return of the Displaced,” 41.

<sup>58</sup> Gause III, “Beyond Sectarianism,” 5-6.

<sup>59</sup> Gause III, “Beyond Sectarianism,” 6.

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ideological compatibility and regime similarity.”<sup>60</sup> Gause’s analysis will be further examined in the chapters to follow.

*Emad Y. Kaddorah’s (2018) “The Regional Geo-sectarian Contest over the Gulf”*

Emad Kaddorah (2018), researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Qatar, builds upon some of Gause’s findings by diving deeper into, what he terms, a “geo-sectarian contest.”<sup>61</sup> Like Gause, Kaddorah contends that although sectarianism has a part to play in the rivalry, most of the conflicts where these two countries are involved are battles for regional influence.<sup>62</sup> This competition for influence can broadly be broken down into Saudi Arabia’s desire to maintain both its dominant position within the political structure of the GCC and its authority on religious matters within the Islamic world, vice Iran’s ambitions of creating a new regional system where Iran plays a significant role in Gulf security.<sup>63</sup> The sectarian element of the current cold war, according to Kaddorah, originated with the Iranian Revolution and really came to fruition after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>64</sup> Deposing Saddam Hussein upset the balance of power between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Iraq and paved the way for terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS to further aggravate regional insurgencies.<sup>65</sup> The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia further embedded itself into the region following the Arab uprisings in 2011, when the two regional powers competed for influence via proxy warfare in Arab states such as Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen.<sup>66</sup>

Evident in both Gause and Kaddorah’s research is the assertion that Iran is “winning” the Saudi-Iranian cold war. The perceived threat Iran poses to the region differs among the regional powers. As this thesis will describe, many of the less well-understood cold wars have a part to

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<sup>60</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, “Ideologies, Alignment, and Underbalancing in the New Middle East Cold War,” *American Political Science Association* (July 2017): 674, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517000373>.

<sup>61</sup> Emad Y. Kaddorah, “The Regional Geo-sectarian Contest over the Gulf,” *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 21-32.

<sup>62</sup> Kaddorah, “The Regional Geo-sectarian Contest over the Gulf,” 22. See also Gause, “Beyond Sectarianism,” 1.

<sup>63</sup> Kaddorah, “The Regional Geo-sectarian Contest over the Gulf,” 23.

<sup>64</sup> Kaddorah, “The Regional Geo-sectarian Contest over the Gulf,” 24.

<sup>65</sup> Kaddorah, “The Regional Geo-sectarian Contest over the Gulf,” 24.

<sup>66</sup> Kaddorah, “The Regional Geo-sectarian Contest over the Gulf,” 25.

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play in deciding the ultimate victor (if there will be one) of the cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

*Aras Syahmanssuri's (2020) "A Rivalry of Necessity: An Analysis of Mechanisms of Contention between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia"*

Aras Syahmanssuri's (2020) dissertation proposes three essential elements of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. These three elements include (1) the two country's respective roles in the oil market and command of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), (2) the use of proxy warfare, and (3) their specific leadership's varying foreign policy interests since the Iranian Revolution.<sup>67</sup> Though sectarianism has a part to play in recruiting proxies,<sup>68</sup> Syahmanssuri argues that the ancient Sunni-Shia divide is insufficient in explaining the modern Saudi-Iranian rivalry.<sup>69</sup> Instead, these powers also compete over the price for oil in order to fund their respective proxies.<sup>70</sup> These proxy wars are similar to a cold war creating a bipolarity within the region, in the sense that regional weak states must turn to either Saudi Arabia or Iran for support.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, Iran's exportation of anti-monarchical revolutionary movements, and Saudi Arabia's attempts to contain them, provides the two country's leaders an opportunity to promote their own legitimacy among influential religious leaders.<sup>72</sup> Syahmanssuri offers that only regime change or the capitulation of either Iran or Saudi Arabia will dissolve this decades-long rivalry.<sup>73</sup>

### The Cold War Between Islamist movements and the Monarchies

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<sup>67</sup> Aras Syahmanssuri, "A Rivalry of Necessity: An Analysis of Mechanisms of Contention between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," (PhD diss., Old Dominion University, 2020), 1-2, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<sup>68</sup> Syahmanssuri, "A Rivalry of Necessity," 28-29.

<sup>69</sup> Syahmanssuri, "A Rivalry of Necessity," 241.

<sup>70</sup> Syahmanssuri, "A Rivalry of Necessity," 242.

<sup>71</sup> Syahmanssuri, "A Rivalry of Necessity," 186.

<sup>72</sup> Syahmanssuri, "A Rivalry of Necessity," 186.

<sup>73</sup> Syahmanssuri, "A Rivalry of Necessity," 3.

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The Arab Spring instigated a renewed interest in Islamic political movements and drew particular attention to organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Tunisian Ennahda Movement, which we might define as Islamic democrats inasmuch as these political Islamists profess a desire to participate in a democratic process. These parties, and their state sponsors Turkey and Qatar, challenge the Sunni authoritarian regimes (Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt) by deploying a more religious and liberal rhetoric, suffused with populist language of justice, equality, and dignity. Few scholars have analyzed the soft power that Turkey and Qatar furnished to these Islamist movements and how these two countries' patronages has posed new challenges for the autocrats with regards to regime security.

*Birol Başkan's (2016) Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*

Birol Başkan (2016), Assistant Professor at Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, compares the remarkable alignment of foreign policy between Turkey and Qatar following the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring. Başkan's thesis argues that "Turkey and Qatar had pursued similar foreign policies throughout the 2000s and during the Arab Spring, realigning independently their positions of major issues, and eventually forged a special relationship in the aftermath of the military coup in Egypt in 2013 in order to break the state of regional isolation each found itself in."<sup>74</sup> He demonstrates this over the course of three sections: the first section explaining the impact of the United States' invasion of Iraq on regional geopolitics; the second section emphasizing how Turkey and Qatar benefited from the new geopolitical conditions of the Arab Spring; and a final section estimating the future of Turkey-Qatar relations.<sup>75</sup>

Başkan ascribes Turkey and Qatar's success in the post-9/11 environment to their ability to remain bipartisan amidst a deepening rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, through diverse economic and political ties, their regional mediation efforts, and by developing stronger relationships with Islamist democratic organizations, which for him includes the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas.<sup>76</sup> As two of the few countries to benefit from the changing geopolitics

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<sup>74</sup> Birol Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, Palgrave Pivot, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 2.

<sup>75</sup> Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, 35-36, 51-52.

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of the region, Turkey and Qatar were in a unique position to further take advantage of the regional politics amidst the Arab Spring. Başkan notes that the preexisting economic and political relations Turkey and Qatar established with the nations hit hardest by the Arab Spring (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria)<sup>77</sup> allowed Qatari news network Al-Jazeera to take “a strong pro-revolutionary stand, and sought to shape events,”<sup>78</sup> while Turkey saw an opportunity to “shine as a model” of democracy “in Egypt, first, and then in the rest of the Arab World.”<sup>79</sup>

Following the violent aftermath of the 2013 coup in Egypt and the waning of protests, Turkey and Qatar faced heavy criticism from the Gulf States for their support of the Muslim Brotherhood, until the attention shifted towards the region’s new challenge of the so-called Islamic State.<sup>80</sup> Here Başkan observes that Turkey and Qatar were “presented an opportunity to mend their ties with others and break their isolation,” in particular with Saudi Arabia which shared their views about the Assad regime.<sup>81</sup> The fight against ISIS, coupled with the support lent to Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the civil war in Yemen, eventually drew Turkey and Qatar more into direct military and financial involvement in some of these civil wars across the region. Başkan concludes his work with a projection of Turkey and Qatar’s future utility as allies:

Turkey might be a useful ally for Qatar as the latter seeks to balance its much stronger neighbors, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. For these countries, Turkey’s utility depends on how willing it is to balance Iran. The problem is that Turkey is not willing to do that. It must be remembered that Turkey kept its good relations with Iran both before and after the Arab Spring....The most likely scenario is that Turkey will continue to appease both Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>82</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, this thesis will delve further into Başkan’s assessments in this cold war’s respective chapter.

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<sup>77</sup> Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, 83-84.

<sup>78</sup> Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, 85.

<sup>79</sup> Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, 87.

<sup>80</sup> Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, 131-132.

<sup>81</sup> Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, 132.

<sup>82</sup> Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, 141.

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*Mohammed Ayoob and Danielle N. Lussier's (2020) The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in Muslim Societies*

Mohammed Ayoob and Danielle Lussier (2020) examine democratic Islamism's threat to the monarchical regimes. Ayoob and Lussier offer a unique perspective on this topic, focusing more on the fundamentals of political Islam and its driving forces rather than on the events that shape the world's understanding of it. Three major assumptions about political Islam are debunked in their work: "These are, first, that the intermingling of religion and politics is unique to Islam; second, that political Islam, like Islam itself, is monolithic; and third, that political Islam is inherently violent."<sup>83</sup> To summarize, Ayoob and Lussier assert that the intermingling of religion and politics is seen in all three of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity),<sup>84</sup> that "the political manifestations of Islam ... is to a great extent context-specific and is the result of interpenetration of religious precepts and local culture, including political culture,"<sup>85</sup> and that "depending on the Islamist group's political objectives, violence may be combined with electoral tactics."<sup>86</sup> These three points must be considered when weighing the real threat Islamic democracy poses to the monarchies.

One of the greatest advantages the Islamists have—and that the monarchies are unable to stifle, according to Ayoob and Lussier—is their ability to present themselves as the only legitimate alternative to oppressive regimes by using accepted Muslim rhetoric to mobilize support.<sup>87</sup> As there has not been a leader in Islam with both absolute "temporal and religious authority" since the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions,<sup>88</sup> "no single individual, group, or institution can rightfully claim to speak for all Muslims, let alone on behalf of Islam."<sup>89</sup> This makes it particularly difficult for regimes to censor "religious idiom for the expression of

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<sup>83</sup> Mohammed Ayoob and Danielle N. Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in Muslim Societies*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 1.

<sup>84</sup> Ayoob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 14.

<sup>85</sup> Ayoob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> Ayoob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 20.

<sup>87</sup> Ayoob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 37-38.

<sup>88</sup> Ayoob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 13.

<sup>89</sup> Ayoob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 27

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political dissent.”<sup>90</sup> To this last point, the authors submit that the gap is then filled by extremists due “directly to state failure, the failure of secular regimes to provide material prosperity, and the subsequent failure of more moderate Islamists to oust these secular regimes.”<sup>91</sup> The most obvious example of this was the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood under Egyptian presidents Nasser and Sadat during the 1970s-1980s and ultimately after the coup in 2013 that earned the Muslim Brotherhood the label as a terrorist organization by many Arab countries.<sup>92</sup>

Looking towards the future, Ayooob and Lussier maintain that any attempt to predict political Islam’s trajectory or influence can primarily be “determined by factors that are discrete to particular contexts.”<sup>93</sup> In other words, there is no collective trajectory for Islamic democracy movements due primarily to the different conditions in which these Islamic movements are operating. Finally, the authors provide the conditions in which Islamism in general will continue to flourish:

One can extrapolate from this analysis that as long as authoritarian and repressive regimes continue to rule Muslim countries, Islamism will continue to thrive as an ideology and political movement in those countries. It is true that the character of these regimes can be explained by multiple factors operating in diverse mixes in different locales, but as far as political Islam is concerned, the outcome is similar in almost all contexts. The nature of regimes, one can argue, is a crucial factor that determines how popular political Islam becomes in widely divergent Muslim countries.<sup>94</sup>

Concerned with regime security, the monarchies continue to combat the Islamists in their own states and fund proxies to do the same in others. Additionally, the movements have propped up Turkey as an example of a secular, functioning Islamic democracy and have thereby elevated Turkey’s soft power in the region. As these two sources have demonstrated, and as this thesis will improve upon, there is a vibrant and sometimes violent cold war taking place between the Islamists and their sponsors Turkey and Qatar, and the monarchical regimes. This cold war blends with—but is distinct from—the cold war for leadership of Islam.

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<sup>90</sup> Ayooob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 37.

<sup>91</sup> Ayooob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 40.

<sup>92</sup> Ayooob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 87.

<sup>93</sup> Ayooob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 163.

<sup>94</sup> Ayooob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 168.

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### The Cold War for Leadership of Islam

The growing discord between Saudi Arabia and Turkey transcends Turkey's promotion of its governing model throughout MENA. The rise of the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP, or *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* in Turkish) reoriented Turkish foreign policy with a greater focus on the Middle East and less reliance on Western allies. Harkening back to its Ottoman past, the AKP seeks to establish a foothold in former Ottoman territories as a form of populist nationalism in its efforts to appeal to Turkish public sentiments and to gain votes. Adding the religious element, the last legitimate Caliph of Islam died with the Ottoman Empire. A "neo-Ottoman" Turkey threatens Saudi Arabia's de facto leadership of Islam in its role as the Custodian of Islam's two holiest sites.

*Özden Zeynep Oktav's (2018) "Quo Vadis Turkey-GCC States Relations? A Turkish Perspective"*

Özden Oktav (2018) offers several reasons why Turkey's relationship with the Gulf states is dwindling. As it relates to competing leadership of Islam, Saudi Arabia in particular is threatened by Turkey's "neo-Ottoman aspirations."<sup>95</sup> The relationship between the two countries fluctuates often in connection with Turkey's inconsistent relations with Iran. For example, Saudi Arabia and Turkey allied in response to shared threat perceptions of Iran's nuclear capability.<sup>96</sup> Those relations quickly deteriorated with Turkey's continual support of the Muslim Brotherhood, increased military presence in Qatar, and strengthened relations with both Iran and Russia.<sup>97</sup> Turkey's alignment with Iran and Russia on a Syrian cease-fire shifts the balance of power away from Saudi Arabia and towards both Iran and Turkey as a regional power. Finally, Oktav submits that Turkey's Islamic democracy model and support of Islamist political movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood is likely the "one single issue that has bedeviled Turkey-GCC relations."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Özden Zeynep Oktav, "Quo Vadis Turkey-GCC States Relations? A Turkish Perspective," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 107-124.

<sup>96</sup> Oktav, "Quo Vadis Turkey-GCC States Relations? A Turkish Perspective," 111.

<sup>97</sup> Oktav, "Quo Vadis Turkey-GCC States Relations? A Turkish Perspective," 111-112.

<sup>98</sup> Oktav, "Quo Vadis Turkey-GCC States Relations? A Turkish Perspective," 119-120.

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*Lorenzo C. B. Gontijo and Roberson S. Barbosa's "Erdogan's Pragmatism and the Ascension of AKP in Turkey: Islam and Neo-Ottomanism"*

Gontijo and Barbosa (2020) track the rise of the AKP, examining the party's impact on Turkish national identity and involvement in the Middle East. The AKP's traditionally Islamist and anti-Western ideology changed following the terrorist attacks of September 11 to be more representative of a conservative democracy.<sup>99</sup> Once the AKP won the presidency in 2002, neo-Ottomanism as a concept became the AKP's pragmatic way of gluing the religion of Islam with secular modernity, championed by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.<sup>100</sup> The goal of neo-Ottomanism, according to Gontijo and Barbosa, is to revive Turkish nationalism by "creat[ing] an imagined Ottoman-Islamic grand past built by the Turks," and this vision is received or legitimized by involvement in the territories that once belonged to the Ottoman Empire.<sup>101</sup> Erdoğan and the AKP project neo-Ottomanism ideology through Turkish media to rally support for the party domestically and internationally.<sup>102</sup> This concept directly conflicts with both Saudi Arabia and Iran's vying for influence in MENA for leadership. Gontijo and Barbosa propose that if the goals of neo-Ottomanism fail, this strategy will effectively end the AKP and Erdoğan's legitimacy.

The Arab Spring elevated Turkey's status as a contender for regional influence, especially in Egypt and Syria. Despite Saudi Arabia's resentment towards Turkey for its support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Riyadh fought alongside Turkey against the Assad regime in Syria, albeit with different interests.<sup>103</sup> The latter decision puts Turkey at odds with Iran and Iraq, who had previously good relations with the country.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Lorenzo C. B. Gontijo and Roberson S. Barbosa, "Erdogan's Pragmatism and the Ascension of AKP in Turkey: Islam and Neo-Ottomanism," *Digest of Middle East Studies*, no. 29 (2020): 79. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12205>.

<sup>100</sup> Gontijo and Barbosa, "Erdogan's pragmatism and the ascension of AKP in Turkey," 80-81.

<sup>101</sup> Gontijo and Barbosa, "Erdogan's pragmatism and the ascension of AKP in Turkey," 81.

<sup>102</sup> Gontijo and Barbosa, "Erdogan's pragmatism and the ascension of AKP in Turkey," 81-83, 88-89.

<sup>103</sup> Gontijo and Barbosa, "Erdogan's pragmatism and the ascension of AKP in Turkey," 86.

<sup>104</sup> Gontijo and Barbosa, "Erdogan's pragmatism and the ascension of AKP in Turkey," 86.

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*James M. Dorsey's (2020) "The Battle for the Soul of Islam"*

Dr. James Dorsey (2020) is a leading scholar on the complex geopolitical competitions in the Middle East, including Turkey's vying for religious leadership of Islam. In his article, "The Battle for the Soul of Islam," Dorsey compares the competing influences of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Indonesia with their different brands of religious and political Islam.<sup>105</sup> At its core, the main debate among Muslims according to Dorsey is centered on "what role the state, if at all, should play in the enforcement of religious morals and the place of religion in education, judicial systems and politics."<sup>106</sup> Until the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Saudi Arabia exercised its religious soft power to become Islam's uncontested leader. The kingdom later combined its religious soft power with hard power throughout the region to combat Iran's nationalistic goals. The resulting "ultra-conservative, anti-Shiite, anti-Iranian interpretation of the faith" proselytized by the Saudis to Muslims worldwide created an opportunity for Turkey, UAE, Qatar, and Indonesia to offer alternative Muslim governing and religious models.<sup>107</sup>

Turkey and UAE are perhaps the greatest contenders for the "soul of Islam" on the Middle Eastern stage and are also engaged in a rivalry of their own. Dorsey concurs with previously mentioned events that gave rise to Erdoğan's neo-Ottomanistic vision and adds that Erdoğan's grand mosque building projects, as well as his leveraging of the Diyanet's (a.k.a. Religious Affairs Department) role in foreign and aid policy, has elevated Turkey's image as a legitimate heir to Islamic leadership.<sup>108</sup> The 2016 attempted coup to overthrow Erdoğan expedited Erdoğan's campaign to link Turkey to its Ottoman past. By presenting Turkey as a protector of Muslims everywhere, but especially for those countries that were once protectorates of the Ottoman Empire, Erdoğan's influence on the regional and international stage has earned him popularity among Muslims worldwide.<sup>109</sup> Popular, that is, among countries except the authoritarian regimes of Saudi Arabia and UAE.

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<sup>105</sup> James M. Dorsey, "The Battle for the Soul of Islam," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 27, no. 10 (2020): 106-107.

<sup>106</sup> Dorsey, "The Battle for the Soul of Islam," 107.

<sup>107</sup> Dorsey, "The Battle for the Soul of Islam," 110-111.

<sup>108</sup> Dorsey, "The Battle for the Soul of Islam," 117.

<sup>109</sup> Dorsey, "The Battle for the Soul of Islam," 118.

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Modern rivalry between Turkey and the autocratic regimes of Saudi Arabia and UAE stems from the 2011 Arab Uprisings, as will be discussed in depth in the chapter on Muslim democracy movements. As it relates to leadership of Islam, Dorsey documents several key events that highlight the power competition between these three countries. The UAE helped topple the Turkish and Qatari-backed Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi in 2013, engineered the 2017 crippling diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar, and allegedly helped orchestrate the unsuccessful coup against Erdoğan in 2016.<sup>110</sup> Saudi Arabia stood with UAE in each of these cases, but soured its own relations with Turkey following the Saudi crown prince's sanctioned 2018 killing of Khashoggi in Istanbul.<sup>111</sup> Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's crown princes continue to re-shape this cold war, as both Mohammed Bin Salman (MbS) and Mohammed Bin Zayed (MbZ) seek to rebrand their kingdoms as tolerant, modern, and forward-thinking.<sup>112</sup> Dorsey sums up the UAE's progress in the following way:

Despite ruling at home with an iron fist, Bin Zayed has been able to promote a state-controlled Islam that styles itself as tolerant and apolitical and preaches obedience to established rulers without addressing outdated or intolerant concepts embedded in the faith such as the notion of kafirs or infidels, slavery, and Muslim supremacy that remain reference points even if large numbers of Muslims do not heed them in their daily life. His success, backed by armies of paid Western lobbyists, is evidenced by the fact that the UAE is widely perceived as a religiously tolerant, pluralistic, and enlightened society.<sup>113</sup>

Turkey faces a steep challenge not only in combating the long-held champion and leader of Islam, Saudi Arabia, but also must compete with the kingdom's powerful and growingly popular sister, the UAE.

### **Weaknesses and Gaps in the Literature**

Complete analysis of the conditions of emergence, structures, and trajectories of the four stated cold wars this thesis seeks to unveil are not treated in the available literature. Indeed, the literature outlined in this review falls short in at least four overarching ways. First, studies on several of the meta-conflicts are outdated and do not capture the most recent developments.

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<sup>110</sup> Dorsey, "The Battle for the Soul of Islam," 113, 118.

<sup>111</sup> Dorsey, "The Battle for the Soul of Islam," 118.

<sup>112</sup> Dorsey, "The Battle for the Soul of Islam," 112.

<sup>113</sup> Dorsey, "The Battle for the Soul of Islam," 112.

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Second, much of the literature is surface-level analysis that does not attempt to map the full range of structural factors that are shaping the contemporary trajectories of these conflicts. Without that understanding, there is no basis for proposing a middle-range theory as to their trajectories. Third, the individual cold wars have never been amalgamated together in a holistic analysis to determine their intersectionality or common drivers. Finally, the literature lacks a futures edge, and thus provides little value in terms of strategy and resourcing. Each of these gaps in the literature are apparent in the following specific examples.

First, the post-Trump, post-Abrahamic Accords era, the perceived victory by Hamas in Gaza in 2021 conflict, and the new resistance movement by Palestinian-Israelis, who are citizens of Israel, make a new turn in this conflict and warrant a more holistic and comprehensive analysis of the likely future trajectory of this infrequently hot “Cold War.” Additionally, scholars extensively cover the histories and grievances of both Israeli and Palestinian narratives, but the trends in this competing binary of identity narrative structures are not well known.

Second, Gause, Kaddorah, and Syahmanssuri reframe the popularly-termed “sectarian war” between Shia and Sunnis into a geopolitical struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but few have attempted to project the future trajectory of this cold war. Understanding the root causes of this conflict, the factors contributing to proxy warfare, and the trajectory of this rivalry will assist in taking preventative action in countries or arenas where this violent rivalry has not yet manifested.

Third, the literature surrounding the political Islamist movements, with their sponsors Turkey and Qatar, is considerably outdated. Başkan’s 2016 work amply describes how the two regional powers grew to become unlikely influencers, but much has changed geopolitically since 2016. Events such as the Saudi-led blockade on Qatar (2017 – 2021) and the new developments surrounding the civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya require a return to this cold war and its impact. Ayoob details the history of MB and other important Muslim democracy movements but fails to connect their relevance to the current contentions with the autocratic regimes.

Fourth, the emerging geopolitical conflict between Saudi Arabia and Turkey for the leadership role of Islam is underrepresented in the literature, or incomplete. Anxious to return to its former glory and reignite Turkish nationality, the AKP and its champion Recep Tayyip Erdoğan not only threaten Saudi Arabia for the leadership of Islam, but also threaten to aggravate the already brittle conditions of the region the AKP seeks to influence. Concerned with his own regime security, Erdoğan needs the neo-Ottoman vision to succeed if he is to remain in power.

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Understanding Erdoğan's tactics in stripping Saudi Arabia of its leadership role illuminates some of Turkey's intentions and plans for the region going forward.

Finally, the literature does little to holistically address the intersectionality of these cold wars, especially their common drivers of emergence. Major events in one cold war sends ripples throughout the others, making it difficult to contain the existing and emerging threats that stem from these macro-level conflicts. This thesis argues that if the common drivers of emergence for these cold wars can be identified, national security professionals and policy makers will be able to identify emerging conflicts early on and be better prepared to act accordingly, rather than react.

### **Approach & Methodology**

For all of these reasons, the research question remains germane: "What are the existing and emerging major geopolitical struggles, or "cold wars," of the broader Middle East, and what is their likely trajectory over the next 10 years?"

The method used for this thesis is an interpretive social analysis with an emphasis on the various social structures which function as the factors that are shaping the trajectory of each conflict. These structural factors are gleaned from the data via the method of grounded theory, whereby each element of the data is examined for specific causal or shaping factors that relate directly to the research question. This first-level coding is then arranged into broader sensible causal categories which can be shown to be reasonably shaping these conflicts.<sup>114</sup>

Preliminary data from primary, secondary, and tertiary sources will shape the current understanding of the individual cold wars and simultaneously highlight the information gaps this thesis seeks to fill. This predominantly qualitative approach will identify the cultural, political, economic, and other key structures that contributed to the emergence of each conflict and further delineate any common drivers of their trajectories. Doing so will aid in the understanding of where each cold war's trajectory may intersect with the trajectory of others.

Again, to ascertain the range of meaningful structural factors shaping the trajectory of these major geopolitical struggles, all related data will be "coded" or sorted into developmental factor categories through a lens which asks, "To what extent does a structural factor shape the

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<sup>114</sup> David Belt "An Interpretive Sociological Framework for the Analysis of Threats," *American Intelligence Journal* 32, no. 1 (2015): 45.

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trajectory of an existing or emerging macro-level conflict in the Middle East, and how does this shape the cold war question?” This practice is in line with Corbin and Strauss’ (2008) widely accepted method of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, that ultimately results in an objective explanation or theory for a given phenomenon.<sup>115</sup> A greater focus on the meaning of the data—not just collecting it—will further enhance our interpretive understanding as argued by Charmaz (2000).<sup>116</sup> This framework allows malleability in the formation of topics and sub-topics to be addressed in the chapters. The literature reviewed previously points to the existence of at least four current cold wars, each with varying levels of depth and history. As such, the available sources for each cold war may differ significantly and require adjustment where appropriate.

### Analytic Framework

This thesis will approach this topic as an interpretive social analysis, utilizing inductive reasoning in the spirit of grounded theory, to produce a middle range theory intended to serve as an intelligence estimate on the topic. The security context for this research is the rift in political, economic, and military alignments among countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as well as their relations with world powers.

Chapter 1 reviewed the literature on the various regional major geopolitical struggles and their conceptualizations. This was done topically to demonstrate the need to examine the individual conditions of emergence and the persistence of each cold war. The last part of the chapter will explain the methodology or approach, outlining a broad interpretive sociological analytic framework of structures, agency and events to be examined in each of the many cold wars, with the chapter summary below serving as the broader organization:

Chapter 2 examines the present and transitioning Arab-Israeli cold war. A brief exploration of the conflict’s more contemporary structures since the 2006 election which vaulted Hamas to power in Gaza will serve as the foundation in illuminating five fundamental issues fueling the Arab-Israeli cold war: First, there is the intractable irreconcilable religious and

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<sup>115</sup> Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 2008) in Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Omrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed., (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson 2010), 142-143.

<sup>116</sup> Kathy Charmaz, “Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods,” In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 510.

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political narratives between Hamas and other resistance-minded Palestinians and farther-Right Israelis, especially the Settler movement. Second, there is the entrenchment of Hamas in Gaza, and the ability of Iran to provide it with rockets that terrorize Southern Israeli villages. Third, there is the useful role this cold war plays in Iran and Turkey's struggle with Saudi Arabia for leadership of the umma. Fourth, there is the growing resentment and resistance movement among Palestinian-Israelis, or Palestinian citizens of Israel. Fifth, there is the shifting public opinion in the United States and globally that creates more solidarity with the Palestinians.

Chapter 3 examines and describes the present and emerging dynamics of the meta-conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which has spilled over into proxy wars in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Pakistan. This part will analyze the following structures that are shaping this conflict's trajectory: (1) the existential need for each irreconcilable model of Islamic governance to wholly delegitimize the other, thereby creating a win-lose conflict paradigm; (2) the rise of the Salafist doctrine of *takfirism* as part of Saudi Arabia's strategy to religiously delegitimize the Iranian regime; (3) the accelerating arms race and its capacity to move the cold war closer to a ground war; (4) and the economic disparity between Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as other economic factors driving the conflict.

Chapter 4 examines and describes the present and emerging structure of the cold war between the region's Islamist democracy movements and their state sponsors, versus the anti-democracy monarchical and military dictatorship regimes. This chapter will analyze the following structures and their trends: (1) the ideational power of political Islam and the support these movements have among Muslim populations across the region and worldwide; (2) the basis for Turkey and Qatar's support to the Islamist movements and how their support threatens the predominant monarchical regimes of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the military dictatorship in Egypt; and (3) the anti-Islamist regimes' security strategies to demobilize Islamist democracy movement and to delegitimize their state backers of Turkey and Qatar, amidst challenges from their citizens and global investors for expanded human rights and better governance.

Chapter 5 analyzes the structural and strategic elements of Turkey's more hegemonic geopolitical Middle East turn, and how its neo-Ottomanism creates strategic reactions that adds to the inherent religious and economic clashes with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The intersectionality between this cold war and the cold war against the Islamist democracy movements will then be annotated.

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The conclusion attempts to add further value with new strategic insights that only this kind of holistic analysis can provide.

### **Data Production**

Data produced in this thesis consisted of open-source materials comprised of publicly available primary and secondary sources. Some of these sources include government documents and treatises of relevant countries, news media both foreign and U.S.-based, finished expert analyses and published surveys. Data was collected via library databases, audio-visual materials, online peer-reviewed journals, and recognized government or international organization website

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## CHAPTER 2

### THE ARAB-ISRAELI COLD WAR

Israel has solved every problem except the Arab problem, and that is the only important problem now worth solving.

—Rabbi Lionel Blue, “Jews and Arabs”

Five fundamental and contemporary problems fuel the ongoing hostility between Israel, its Palestinian neighbors, and the broader pan-Arab resistance. First, are the intractable religious and political narratives between many Palestinians and Israelis, especially over the matter of settlements. The binary narratives that many people on either side hold, regarding the final status issues of territorial sovereignty and the right of return, serve as the root of the Arab-Israeli cold war. From this root stems the remaining four problems that exacerbate what Rabbi Lionel Blue called Israel’s “Arab problem.”<sup>117</sup> Second, Hamas and other militant groups’ entrenchment in Gaza and their ability to terrorize southern Israeli cities and villages is the second problem prolonging this conflict. Third, Turkey, Hizballah and Iran often latch onto the conflict’s publicity and therefore utility in challenging Saudi Arabia for leadership of the *umma*. Fourth, some Arab-Israeli citizens’ growing resentment towards the highly politicized notion of a Jewish nation-state has shifted their loyalties and trust towards Hamas and other like-minded Islamist groups. The growing disaffection of Arab citizens of Israel and their increasing political activism presents new security and governance challenges to the Israeli government. The fifth and final problem fueling the Arab-Israeli cold war is shifting public opinion in the United States and globally that could create more solidarity with the Palestinians.

Each of these problems will be examined sequentially, and then analyzed holistically to estimate the future trajectory of this conflict out to 2030. The analysis shows how the resolution of this cold war demands addressing each of its five contemporary roots outlined here, why the lofty goal of comprehensive peace is unlikely, and why better managing the conflict to reduce its negative effects is a more reasonable strategy.

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<sup>117</sup> Lionel Blue, “Jews and Arabs,” *European Judaism* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 105, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ej.2018.510114>.

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### Intractable Narratives

The first problem fueling the region's longest contemporary cold war are the intractable religious and political narratives between many Palestinian groups and elements of the Israeli farther Right, especially the settler movement. These two narratives are well known: Jewish Zionism on the one hand, and Islamist nationalism and "resistance," on the other.

Two articles in the literature review sum up these conflicting views. Omer Bartov's piece cited the Zionist perception that the Jews were displaced twice, the land was theirs to begin with, and the tragedy of the Holocaust outweighs the fate of the millions of Arabs forced to leave their homes to establish a Jewish majority in the new nation-state.<sup>118</sup> Ronit Lentin's work "Palestinian Lives Matter" hinted at the Islamist nationalist view, namely that Palestinian suffering is a direct consequence of Israeli occupation, oppression, and colonization.<sup>119</sup> Additionally, the 1988 Hamas Charter and 2009 Hizballah Charter categorically rejected Israel's claim to the Holy Land, deeming Palestine as part of the *waqf* (endowment) for the Muslim people.<sup>120</sup> Yitzhak Reiter challenged Hamas' *waqf* claim calling it "a novel politically-oriented myth, rooted neither in Islamic legal texts nor in historical practice."<sup>121</sup> Reiter noted however, that the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Palestinians in general defended Hamas' *waqf* narrative, making the land holy and inalienable in their view.<sup>122</sup> What are not well-known are the trends in this competing binary of identity narrative structures.

At least two major trends within these conflicting structures demonstrate the complexity in reconciling the competing narratives. First, the "zero-sum" view these conflicting narratives present negatively affects peace negotiations and compromises. Second, while the Palestinian narrative is accepted and propagated by the broader pan-Arab community, not all Arab states

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<sup>118</sup> Bartov, "The Return of the Displaced," 38.

<sup>119</sup> Lentin, "Palestinian Lives Matter," 135. See also page 9 of this thesis.

<sup>120</sup> For the 1988 charter, see Muhammad Maqdisi, "Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) of Palestine," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 22, no. 4 (1993): 122–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2538093>. For Hezbollah, "The New Hezbollah Manifesto," Lebanon Renaissance, November 2009, <http://www.lebanonrenaissance.org/assets/Uploads/15-The-New-Hezbollah-Manifesto-Nov09.pdf>.

<sup>121</sup> Yitzhak Reiter, "All of Palestine is Holy Muslim *Waqf* Land": A Myth and It's Roots," in *Law, Custom, and Statute in the Muslim World*, vol. 28, edited by Ron Shaham (Leiden: Brill 2006), 174, <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004154537.i-263.60>.

<sup>122</sup> Reiter, "All of Palestine is Holy Muslim *Waqf* Land," 173-174.

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prioritize the Israeli-Palestinian problem. Bilateral agreements between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco under the Abraham Accords demonstrate this point, as will be discussed. Disunity among the Arab powers over the Palestinian issue empowers Hamas and other Islamic resistance groups to structure the Palestinian narrative in a way that benefits resistance or irredentist nationalist objectives. These trends catalyze an already contentious war of narratives into increasingly more frequent violence between Israel and the pan-Arab resistance.

*Zero-Sum View*

Zionism and Islamist nationalism share a bipolar or binary zero-sum view of the settlement issue. Land that is taken from, or given to, an Israeli or Palestinian automatically constitutes a “win” for one side and a “loss” for the other.<sup>123</sup> More generally, international policies that appear to favor either the Israelis or Palestinians more than the other deepen the victimhood mentality, stoke accusations of anti-Jewish or anti-Islamic sentiments, and further solidify respective monolithic narratives. For example, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas publicly stated in April 2018 that the Jews were massacred in the Holocaust not because they were Jewish, but because of their “social function,” their nefarious “usury and banking and such.”<sup>124</sup> Abbas took the Islamist nationalist narrative further when he claimed that Ashkenazi Jews—Jews from northeastern Europe including Germany—were not of semitic descent, implying they do not have historical roots to the Holy Land.<sup>125</sup> These sentiments came only months after the United States recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in December 2017. Similarly, former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu received criticism for posting “Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people – and only it” on Instagram, likely seeking far-

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<sup>123</sup> Ella Ben Hagai and Eileen L. Zurbruggen, “Bridging Narratives: Predictors of Jewish American and Arab American Support for a Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 19, no. 1 (2019): 180.

<sup>124</sup> Isabel Kershner, “Palestinian Leader Incites an Uproar With an Incendiary Speech,” *New York Times*, May 3, 2018, *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed December 15, 2021), <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A537095441/AONE?u=wash41258&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=33dcd5a8>. See also “Holocaust Row: Abbas Accused of Anti-Semitism,” *BBC News*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43967600>.

<sup>125</sup> “Holocaust Row,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43967600>.

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Right support in the April 2019 polls.<sup>126</sup> These examples are only a few statements of the elite, among many over the decades, demonstrating that these binary narratives are manipulated by the opposing polities to acquire political clout from their base supporters.

Any time Israeli-Palestinian tensions elevate into a kinetic conflict, the two sides race to see which side can claim victimhood first. On November 30, 2021, Ms. Ero of the International Crisis Group briefed the UN Security Council that the Palestinians—despite geographic isolation and political moralization— “raised a collective, if amorphous, voice” that “stressed the dispossession and repression of the Palestinians, with the question of Jerusalem at the core” following the May 2021 violence.<sup>127</sup> Likewise, Israeli minister of community affairs Tzachi Hanegbi commented on the same issue: “When we create collateral damage, something we do our utmost to avoid, we feel guilty and sad. ... We don't want children killed in Gaza or elsewhere. The Hamas vision is to shoot at civilians and kill as many as possible.”<sup>128</sup> While not many would disagree with Hanegbi’s slight towards Hamas, Israeli airstrikes killed over 70 children in the 11-day event. Claiming victimhood in this case served as a method to combat perceptions of wrong-doing. Thomas Friedman documented this pattern as early as 1989. Speaking of the Israeli narrative, Friedman wrote that the Holocaust serves as the “curtain that will shield [Israel] from the piercing gaze of the West and allow them to maintain the status quo in the occupied territories.”<sup>129</sup> This “competitive victimhood” dynamic explains one reason Israelis and Palestinians cannot accept the other’s narrative.

A 2012 study conducted by Drs. Shnabel, Nadler, and Halabali of Tel Aviv University and Dr. Masi Noor of Keele University found at least three positive functions in assuming the victim role: its ability to (1) enflame a perceived threat to justify preemptive violent acts, (2) deny responsibility for past wrong-doings, and (3) recruit third-party support for the duration of

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<sup>126</sup> Oliver Homes and Sufian Taha, “‘He’s using his last bullet’: Israeli Arabs Condemn Netanyahu Comments,” *Guardian*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/11/hes-using-his-last-bullet-israeli-arabs-condemn-netanyahu-comments>.

<sup>127</sup> United Nations Security Council, “The Situation in the Middle East, Including the Palestinian Question,” (S/PV.8913), November 30 2021, 5, <https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.8913>.

<sup>128</sup> Roger Cohen, “Battle With Hamas Aids Netanyahu, but Leaves Central Issues Unresolved,” *New York Times*, May 22, 2021, *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed December 15, 2021), <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A662561137/AONE?u=wash41258&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=6d7b092a>.

<sup>129</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 448-449.

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the conflict (through funding, military aid, etc).<sup>130</sup> In the Israeli-Palestinian context, Shnabel et al. write:

Palestinians may be motivated to stress their suffering to draw the Israelis' and the world's attention to the injustice caused by the Israeli occupation. The Israelis may, however, be motivated to stress their suffering at the hands of the Palestinians to gain the Palestinians' and world's understanding of the circumstances that compelled them to engage in what might be otherwise interpreted as immoral behavior.<sup>131</sup>

In their other words, "group members may compete over their share of victimhood to remove different kinds of threats to their collective identities."<sup>132</sup> Minister Hanegbi's comments above fit this category.

If both narratives affirm the victim role, neither the Israelis nor Palestinians are likely to compromise. Alternatively, Hagai and Zurbriggen's separate study (2019) found that individuals are more likely to support solutions that create a more equal distribution of resources between groups when they "incorporat[e] aspects of the other's narrative into one's own account of the conflict (i.e. shifting away from a monolithic narrative)...."<sup>133</sup> For the Israeli-Palestinian context, this means relenting competitive victimhood from respective narratives and accepting (at least part of) each other's conflicting accounts is legitimate.

### *Religious Identity*

A further unfortunate consequence of opposing zero-sum perspectives is the narratives' deep ties to ethnicity and especially religious identity. Evictions of Palestinians in East Jerusalem or Israeli building permits in the West Bank quickly lead to accusations of racism, apartheid, and ethnic cleansing on the part of the Israelis, consistent with the Islamist nationalist narrative. In parallel, the Zionist narrative claims that "Jews want to live in peace, but because of Arab attacks, [Israelis] must continually defend themselves," even if the retaliatory strikes could be

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<sup>130</sup> Nurit Shnabel, Masi Noor, Arie Nadler, and Samer Halabi, "When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16 (2012): 358-359.

<sup>131</sup> Shnabel, et al., "When Suffering Begets Suffering," 361.

<sup>132</sup> Shnabel, et al., "When Suffering Begets Suffering," 361.

<sup>133</sup> Hagai and Zurbriggen, "Bridging Narratives," 189.

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interpreted as excessive.<sup>134</sup> In both cases, ethnicity or religious identity is unavoidably tied to the narrative and therefore deemed a factor for each imagined community's grievances.

Consequently, political attempts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian question unavoidably levies anti-Jewish or anti-Islamic discourse.

Depending on the setting or circumstance, even the specific words used in the media or diplomatic conversations can be controversial and inflame the conflict further. Referring to "Islamophobia" as a term, [though I would argue this is equally applicable to "antisemitism"] Dr. Miriam Elman writes that it is "overused and misapplied," and "has become a vehicle for silencing legitimate criticisms of Palestinian politics, leaders, and societal actors."<sup>135</sup> "Zionism" as a word has evolved to meet the needs of controversial political agendas of the far-Right Israeli leadership and weaponized by Palestinians to unify the pan-Islamist world against Israel.<sup>136</sup> Decades of deeply held political and religious convictions shaped the monolithic and zero-sum narratives in a way that peace is unachievable without addressing ethnic discrimination concerns.

*Al-Aqsa/Temple Mount Symbolic Politics*

Jerusalem, with its prized sacred edifices and grounds, lies at the center of both the political and religious aspects of these zero-sum views. Zionism's religious ties catapulted Al-Aqsa to the center of conflict between Israel and the Islamic community, especially following the 1967 war and then again in the 1993 Oslo Accords. Increased Israeli control of the Temple Mount brought a growing number of Jewish pilgrims drawn to the sanctity of the site.<sup>137</sup> Threatened, Palestinians adopted Al-Aqsa as the central symbol of Palestinian nationalism and used the importance of the Mosque to rally broader pan-Islamic support.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Hagai and Zurbruggen, "Bridging Narratives," 181.

<sup>135</sup> Miriam F. Elman, "Islamophobia," *Israel Studies* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 148.

<sup>136</sup> Bjorn Brenner, *Gaza Under Hamas: From Islamic Democracy to Islamist Governance*, (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2017), 8, 30. See also, Thane Rosenbaum, "Zionism," *Israel Studies* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 126.

<sup>137</sup> Hillel Cohen, "The Temple Mount/al-Aqsa in Zionist and Palestinian National Consciousness: A Comparative View." *Israel Studies Review* 32, no. 1, (Summer 2017): 8.

<sup>138</sup> Cohen, "The Temple Mount/al-Aqsa in Zionist and Palestinian National Consciousness," 14.

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The decades-held status quo at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount demonstrates the immobility of this cold war as a product of zero-sum, conflicting narratives. Dr. Ian Lustick at the University of Pennsylvania applied the *Nash Equilibrium* to explain this pattern in what he called the “Peace Process Carousel.” Nash Equilibrium is a Nobel Prize-winning concept developed by mathematician John Nash that proved in game theory, rational actors will “recapitulate unsuccessful strategies in a recurring pattern because each knows that to try to get what it really wants will mean risk of an intolerable loss.”<sup>139</sup> Applied to Jerusalem and Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, the status quo is the product of recapitulated, unsuccessful strategies towards peace. Neither the Israelis nor Palestinians truly get what they want—unrestricted and exclusive control of the Holy City and its sacred or historical grounds. Palestinians must tolerate Israeli security forces that control access to the mount, as they do not possess the security posture to defend what remains of their national identity. Israel must accept and defend Muslim ownership and worship of the site to balance Jewish-Muslim contentions and to avoid all-out war with the pan-Islamic world.

More broadly, Lustick argues that the Israeli government would prefer to neutralize the Palestinian narrative through some form of conclusive compromise, but settles for “continuing negotiations to nowhere, with a vacant two-state slogan as an official framework....”<sup>140</sup> The PA still hopes for a fairly-drawn state of its own but recognizes the Western world’s predisposition towards the Israeli state. In the meantime, the PA settles for billions of dollars in aid from the international community to prop up its leadership and provide mostly-acceptable living conditions for the Palestinian people.<sup>141</sup>

*The Zero-Sum’s Effect on Gaza*

While the Palestinians living in the West Bank and throughout the Israeli state certainly suffer in this war of narratives, Gaza risks failing as a state completely. Despite Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, Israel asserts itself as an occupying force that prevents travel

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<sup>139</sup> Ian S. Lustick, “The Peace Process Carousel: The Israel Lobby and the Failure of American Diplomacy,” *Middle East Journal* 74, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 178.

<sup>140</sup> Lustick, “The Peace Process Carousel,” 199.

<sup>141</sup> Lustick, “The Peace Process Carousel,” 200.

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between the Palestinian territories, sustains the sea blockade in cooperation with Egypt, and directly controls any international aid to the Strip. Concerning zero-sum views, so long as the Israelis can maintain the “win-lose” in Gaza, the Palestinians there do not have hope in a future Palestinian state.

The Israeli government’s chosen narrative that Gaza is a “hostile territory” and that it should be treated only under the laws of armed conflict, grants Israel its control of Gaza.<sup>142</sup> This “hostile” designation allows the Israeli government to respond with heavy retaliation in times of conflict and offers justification for responding seemingly disproportionately to attacks. Drs. Erika Weinthal and Jeannie Sowers contend that Israel views its targeting of civilian infrastructure, and the civilian casualties that come with it, as collateral damage as a result of this designation and narrative.<sup>143</sup> The recurrent violence between Gaza and Israel in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014, 2018, and 2021 is almost certainly connected with the Israeli government’s permissive attitude toward armed intervention on the basis of designating Gaza a hostile territory. More on Gaza’s entrenchment and the recurring cycle of targeting infrastructure in the Gaza Strip will be discussed at a later point in this chapter.

While nearly every U.S. president tried their hand at “solving” Israeli-Arab issues, former President Donald Trump’s policies towards the conflict pushed the limits of the status quo, heavily favoring the Israeli state. The “Peace to Prosperity Plan” proposed by the Trump administration recommended that the status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif “should continue uninterrupted,” but also allowed “people of every faith ... to pray on the Temple Mount/Haram-al-Sharif,” a recommendation contrary to the non-Muslim ban.<sup>144</sup> To the latter caveat, Ofer Zalzberg argued that: “Unilaterally imposing any change at this national and holy site, whose continued occupation by Israel is a source of deep Palestinian grievance, would dramatically exacerbate hostility between the parties, further deepening the intractability of the issue itself as well as that of the broader conflict.”<sup>145</sup> The perceived loss of Jerusalem as a future

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<sup>142</sup> Erika Weinthal and Jeannie Sowers, “Targeting Infrastructure and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza,” *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2019): 333.

<sup>143</sup> Weinthal and Sowers, “Targeting Infrastructure and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza,” 333.

<sup>144</sup> Donald Trump, *Peace to Prosperity Plan: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*, White House, January 2020, 16.

<sup>145</sup> Ofer Zalzberg, “The Trump Plan Threatens the Status Quo at the Temple Mount/al-Haramal-Sharif,” *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture* 25, no. 1 (2020): 129.

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capital for the Palestinian people, lost land in West Bank, proposed changes at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, and denied “right of return” for approximately 5.4 million Palestinian refugees contributed to a sharp uptick in Palestinian protests and rioting, and mixed responses from the rest of the international community beyond the United States.<sup>146</sup> While these actions by the Trump administration likely deepened Palestinian convictions of victimization, ethnic cleansing, and distrust of the West, the broader pan-Arab community’s connection to the Israeli-Palestinian question raises new problem sets for the irredentist Islamic narrative.

*Implementation of the Palestinian Narrative*

The Arab and broader pan-Islamic community typically embrace the Palestinian narrative, but they often prioritize Palestinian objectives only insofar as engagement achieves their own regional and international aspirations. At the ground level, competition between Hamas and the Palestinian nationalist social democratic party (Fatah) has generated slightly different nationalist narratives. More specifically, their differing ideologies have offered two separate interpretations and responses to the Israeli state.

Unlike Fatah—which favors a two-state solution facilitated through diplomatic channels—Hamas’ religious rigidity does not permit cordial relations with the Jewish state.<sup>147</sup> The resistance movement’s terrorist acts leading up to the Oslo Peace Process in the 1990s demonstrated this point, and more recent statements by Hamas that it would consider upholding previously signed agreements with Israel only serve to provide the movement with strategic ambiguity for the sake of smoothing the way for power-sharing with Fatah in the Territories. While the Palestinians led by Fatah theoretically gained a political arm to engage with the Israelis (through the PLO), Hamas and like-minded resistance groups viewed the Oslo process as acquiescence to their oppressor rather than a step towards self-determination or equal rights. After Hamas’ thwarted attempt to engage politically in 2007, Hamas reverted to extremist tactics

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<sup>146</sup> Trump, *Peace to Prosperity Plan*, 32; Congressional Research Service, “The Palestinians: Overview and Key Issues for U.S. Policy (IF10644),” prepared by Jim Zanotti, January 28, 2021; Mohammed Daraghme and Fares Akram, “Palestinians Angrily Reject Mideast Peace Plan,” *Associated Press*, January 28, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-middle-east-ap-top-news-jerusalem-israel-0dcb0179faf41e1870f35838058f4d18>.

<sup>147</sup> Alon Burstein, “Ideological Rigidity and Flexibility of Secular and Religious Terror Groups: The Case of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Hamas,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 41, no. 9 (2018): 696-697, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1338054>.

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to achieve Palestinian liberation. Hamas interpreted the international community's lack of recognition of their right to governance and perceived betrayal by Fatah as elements of a broader conspiracy to undermine their Islamist movement.<sup>148</sup> Hamas continues to propagate this narrative in traditional media and social media channels today, as will be discussed at a later point.

Following the 11-day bloody conflict in May 2021 between Hamas and Israel, the two Palestinian narratives began to merge in favor of Hamas. Despite differing ideologies and objectives between Hamas and the Palestinians, Hamas defended the Palestinians while Mahmoud Abbas of the PA did not.<sup>149</sup> This has important implications for the Arab-Israeli cold war. For decades, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process lay at the mercy of far-Right Israeli politics under Prime Minister Netanyahu and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas, both laden with corruption charges.<sup>150</sup> The ad-hoc coalition that ousted Netanyahu in 2021 dissolved in June 2022, creating further doubt that a lasting peace agreement will be made soon.<sup>151</sup>

At the strategic level, the 2020 Abraham Accords make an interesting case study for testing pan-Arab commitment to the irredentist Islamist narrative. While the suspension of Israeli annexation of the West Bank was a condition for normalized relations between the UAE and Israel, normalized relations with several Arab states have done little to protect the Palestinians. Arab normalized relations with the Jewish nation-state contradicts the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative that supposedly required improved Israeli-Palestinian negotiations before improving broader

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<sup>148</sup> Brenner, *Gaza Under Hamas*, 32.

<sup>149</sup> Efraim Karsh, "Hamas Doesn't Want a Palestinian State," *Spectator World*, May 22, 2021, <https://spectatorworld.com/topic/hamas-doesnt-want-palestinian-state/>; Griff Witte and Sufian Taha, "Palestinian support for Hamas surges after its confrontation with Israel," *Washington Post*, June 4, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/hamas-israel-west-bank-abbas/2021/06/03/cf19f2cc-c275-11eb-89a4-b7ae22aa193e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/hamas-israel-west-bank-abbas/2021/06/03/cf19f2cc-c275-11eb-89a4-b7ae22aa193e_story.html). See also Juan Cole, "Israel's Pyrrhic Victory: It Razed some buildings, but Reinforced Palestinian National Identity," *Informed Comment*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.juancole.com/2021/05/buildings-reinforced-palestinian.html>.

<sup>150</sup> Isabel Kershner, "Defendant No. 1 or Next Prime Minister? Netanyahu Divides Israel," *New York Times*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/05/world/middleeast/netanyahu-on-trial-israel.html>. See also, Isabel Kerner, "Critic's Death Puts Focus on Palestinian Authority's Authoritarianism," *New York Times*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/07/world/middleeast/Palestinian-Authority-protesters.html>.

<sup>151</sup> Josef Federman, "Israel to Dissolve Parliament, Call 5<sup>th</sup> Election in 3 Years," *Washington Post*, June 21, 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-coalition-agrees-to-dissolve-hold-new-elections/2022/06/20/4a2d0be2-f0b6-11ec-ac16-8fbf7194cd78\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-coalition-agrees-to-dissolve-hold-new-elections/2022/06/20/4a2d0be2-f0b6-11ec-ac16-8fbf7194cd78_story.html).

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pan-Arab cooperation.<sup>152</sup> Dr. Dalia Kaye at the University of California commented on this topic for *Foreign Policy*:

Indeed, the drivers of these regional agreements have nothing to do with the Palestinians. They are about business, trade, and tourism—and the sharing of intelligence and advanced technologies. The continuation of Israeli settlement activity deep in the West Bank, even after Netanyahu was replaced by a broad coalition government, removes any lingering pretense that normalization was about furthering peace with the Palestinians.<sup>153</sup>

She goes on to conclude that although the Arab states share solidarity with the Palestinians and offer symbolic gestures in favor of a two-state solution, the Palestinian issue is shrinking in the minds of Arab leaders and is quickly being replaced by internal national security and economic concerns.<sup>154</sup> Barany, Jones and Guzansky added in the literature review that the monarchies also rely on Israel to counteract Iran, requiring the royal families to periodically capitulate on the Palestinian issue. These factors, combined with several other more pressing issues in the minds of the authoritarian regimes, will be discussed in detail in chapters three and four.

The waning commitment among the Arab, regional hegemony to the Palestinian narrative leaves a vacuum for Hamas and its sponsors to fill. Without hands-on, broader pan-Arab support to negotiate on their behalf, the Palestinians become increasingly reliant on their options closer to home. Despite President Abbas' supposed commitment to the two-state solution and his rejection of former President Trump's peace plan, the Palestinians grow increasingly distrustful of Fatah and look to Hamas as a viable alternative.<sup>155</sup> Should this trend continue, Hamas is likely to take advantage of the pan-Arab absence to feed its more violent Islamist narrative. With

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<sup>152</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Israel-UAE Normalization and Suspension of West Bank Annexation," prepared by Jim Zanotti and Kenneth Katzman, August 19, 2020, 1-2.

<sup>153</sup> Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Why the Abraham Accords Won't Bring Israeli-Palestinian Peace," *Foreign Policy*, October 29, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/29/why-the-abraham-accords-wont-bring-israeli-palestinian-peace/>.

<sup>154</sup> Kaye, "Why the Abraham Accords Won't Bring Israeli-Palestinian Peace," <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/29/why-the-abraham-accords-wont-bring-israeli-palestinian-peace/>.

<sup>155</sup> Pamela Falk, "Palestinians' Mahmoud Abbas rejects Trump's Middle East peace plan," *CBS News*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/palestinians-mahmoud-abbas-rejects-trumps-middle-east-peace-plan/>; Joseph Krauss, "Poll Finds Dramatic Rise in Palestinian Support for Hamas," *Associated Press*, June 15, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/hamas-middle-east-science-32095d8e1323fc1cad819c34da08fd87>.

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nowhere to go and limited political options, Hamas takes advantage of its isolation in Gaza to terrorize Israel. This leads to the second major problem prolonging the Arab-Israeli conflict.

### **Entrenchment in Gaza**

Hamas' entrenchment in Gaza is the second problem fueling the Arab-Israeli cold war. At least two major factors contribute to Hamas' continued isolation in the Strip, and neither factor is exclusive of the other. First is Hamas' label as a terrorist group, a label that it lives up to every few years in its terrorizing of southern Israeli villages with indiscriminate rocket fire and inciting terrorist activity throughout Israel.<sup>156</sup> A brief analysis of Hamas' governance since 2006 will be reviewed to discuss Hamas' selective *jihad* against Israel, and why it views violence as the only viable method to liberate Palestine. Second, as a crucial subset of Israel's nearly exclusive control over all movement of persons and aid into or out of Gaza, is the Israeli targeting of critical infrastructure in Gaza. Retaliatory air strikes on Gaza's water, gas, electric, and clinical structures by Israel, serves to reset the reconstruction timeline, prolongs the humanitarian crisis in the Strip, and deepens Palestinian resentment of Israel.

#### *Hamas as a Terrorist Group*

Before the 2007 Gaza War that resulted in Gaza's isolation and punishment, Hamas attempted to gain international legitimacy by participating in the political process. A robust 2008 RAND article studying "how terrorist groups end" found that many terrorist groups (43 percent of the 648 studied between 1968 and 2006) chose the political route if they found it may better serve their end objective.<sup>157</sup> Additionally—and key in Hamas' case—the nonviolent, political option typically only worked for terrorist groups with narrow policy goals (i.e. "policy change, territorial change, or regime change").<sup>158</sup>

Despite winning the election, Hamas' end objective in liberating Palestine is far from a narrow policy goal. This fact, coupled with the international rejection of the 2006 election results

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<sup>156</sup> Johnathan Schanzer, "Terrorism," *Israel Studies* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 56-57.

<sup>157</sup> Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), 4, 9, 18.

<sup>158</sup> Jones and Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End*, 20.

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and the Qassam Brigade's terrorist activities in 2007, lost Hamas what little political ground it gained and held its political leadership hostage to the movement's extremist wing.<sup>159</sup> The resulting hybridity of Hamas' extremist military wing and its political apparatus changed the terrorist organization's approach in combating Israel after 2007.

Now something more than an Islamist group waging *jihad* against Israel, Hamas has transitioned towards a centrist or more modern form of *sharia* that contrasts sharply with that of the *Salafis*. The former head of Hamas' political bureau Khalid Mish'al (in office from 1996-2017) emphasized that Hamas opposed both the extremes of *Salafist-jihadism* and excessive *muyu'a* (flexibility or "liquidity"). The organization considered global *jihad* indiscriminate killing and extreme while concessions to foreign demands were defeatism.<sup>160</sup> Hamas instead "sees itself, on the other hand, as combining firm opposition to the Israeli occupation—and to it alone, not to the entire world, like global *jihad*— with a 'balanced *wasati* thinking' (*fikr wasati mu'tadil*) and political prudence informed by the openness to the world."<sup>161</sup> Dr. Sagi Polka of Hebrew University and Dr. Meir Litvak of Tel Aviv University assert that this philosophy grants Hamas flexibility in choosing the means to eventually obtain the movement's ultimate goal to liberate Palestine.<sup>162</sup> In other words, Hamas was first a national resistance movement and then a Muslim movement. It uses symbology and frameworks from the latter identity to help legitimize and catalyze the former. However, Hamas tempers its liberation goals to maintain its status quo strategic habitus and to retain clientelistic power in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas' pragmatic means of liberating Palestine manifests itself in a few ways. First, Hamas differs from *Salafi-jihadist* groups by choosing to wage *jihad* gradually. In other words, Hamas is willing to reach its ultimate goal of establishing a Palestinian state through stages rather than expeditiously.<sup>163</sup> Hamas recognizes its limitations as an inconsequential military

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<sup>159</sup> Brenner, *Gaza Under Hamas*, 32, 37-41.

<sup>160</sup> Sagi Polka, "Hamas as a *Wasati* (Literally: Centrist) Movement: Pragmatism Within the Boundaries of the *Sharia*," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 7 (2019): 683.

<sup>161</sup> Polka, "Hamas as a *Wasati* Movement," 683.

<sup>162</sup> Polka, "Hamas as a *Wasati* Movement," 684; Meir Litvak, "Muslim Brothers with a Palestinian Uniqueness," in *The Muslim Brothers—A Religious Vision in a Changing Reality*, ed. Meir Hatina and Uri M. Kupferschmidt (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 2012), 225-229 [in Hebrew].

<sup>163</sup> Polka, "Hamas as a *Wasati* Movement, 702.

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power in isolation and must be strategic in choosing when to wage *jihad*. A second pragmatism building off this idea is Hamas' willingness to agree to a temporary cease-fire or truce with Israel. Hamas adheres to the conditions set out in *sharia* for agreeing to any kind of truce, namely that it can only be declared temporarily to regain military strength or to benefit Muslims.<sup>164</sup> This approach likely serves as the basis for Hamas' consistent but infrequent military action against Israel. The deaths of hundreds of likely Muslims in Gaza, the destruction of smuggling tunnels, and a significantly depleted weapons arsenal, conveniently justified a truce following the May 2021 fighting.

After a failed attempt to secure legitimate political control of the Palestinians (excluding those trapped in Gaza), and with no end to the Israeli blockade in sight, Hamas confronts Israel asymmetrically every few years with increasingly sophisticated weaponry and tactics.<sup>165</sup> Gaza's proximity to Israel's southern border has enticed Iran to provide Hamas more advanced weaponry, including rockets since at least 1992.<sup>166</sup> Hamas and Iran share the same arch-enemy, a similar ideology, and common punishments imposed by the West. However, Hamas is an independent entity not directly controlled by Iran and is Sunni rather than Shia. Iran seems to overlook the Shia-Sunni rivalry to combat Israel or the West, viewing these proxies as participants of its "axis of resistance."<sup>167</sup>

"Resisting" Israel is certainly consistent with Hamas doctrine, but violent acts carried out by its militants are the precise reason Hamas remains on most of the western world's list of terrorist organizations and is central to its suffering in Gaza. In both of its 1988 and 2017 charters, Hamas justifies its violence against Israel, calling on Muslims everywhere to "resist" the Israeli occupation by any means, as it is a "legitimate right" to do so.<sup>168</sup> This language alone

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<sup>164</sup> Polka, "Hamas as a *Wasati* Movement," 702.

<sup>165</sup> Grant Rumley and Neri Zilber, "A Military Assessment of the Israel-Hamas Conflict," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/military-assessment-israel-hamas-conflict>.

<sup>166</sup> Ely Karmon and Michael Barak, "Erdogan's Turkey and the Palestinian Issue," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 2 (2018): 80-81.

<sup>167</sup> Kobi Michael and Yoel Guzansky, "How Afghanistan Influences Hamas, PIJ, and Iran in Their Approach to Israel," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 24, 2021, 2-3. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pdf/view/16976/en>.

<sup>168</sup> For the 1988 charter, see Maqdisi, "Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement

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fits the Israeli government's definition of terrorism, making any conversation on lifting the blockade on Gaza a non-starter.<sup>169</sup> Decades of Hamas-instigated violence have left the Gaza Strip decimated, isolated, and permanently in crisis. But while Hamas may be culpable for most of its suffering, Israel ensures Gaza as a whole pays the price – another manifestation of the zero-sum game being waged by both sides in their pursuit of winning the battle over the broader narrative of legitimacy and suffering.

*The Siege and Targeting of Critical Infrastructure*

The Israeli- and Egyptian-led air, sea, and land blockade on the Gaza Strip punishes Gaza's citizens collectively, creating a perpetual humanitarian disaster that requires the UN to investigate each round of violence for possible war crimes.<sup>170</sup> The siege—though Israel declines to call it such—intentionally deprives Gaza's citizens of basic human needs as part of a policy that many scholars and agencies describe as “de-development,” or “development in reverse.”<sup>171</sup> Israel accomplishes this not only by limiting imports and aid into Gaza, but also by targeting critical infrastructure, as will be shown. This part will analyze some of the key components of Israel's blockade, its purpose, and how the Israelis leverage the blockade to further foil the possibility of a Palestinian state.

Statistics on the dire conditions in Gaza and the strictness of the blockade fluctuate each year, but they consistently demonstrate a general trend of stagnating or degrading conditions for the Palestinians. Following May 2021's hostilities, the World Bank reported 50 percent

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(Hamas) of Palestine,” 122–34. For the 2017 charter, see “Hamas in 2017: The Document in Full,” *Middle East Eye*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full>. See also, Schanzer, “Terrorism,” 56.

<sup>169</sup> Schanzer, “Terrorism,” 53.

<sup>170</sup> For the May 2021 conflict, see Stephanie Nebehay, “U.N. Launches Investigation into Whether Israel, Hamas Committed Crimes,” *Associated Press*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-rights-chief-bachelet-says-israeli-strikes-gaza-may-be-war-crimes-2021-05-27/>.

<sup>171</sup> Ron J. Smith, “Isolation Through Humanitarianism: Subaltern Geopolitics of the Siege on Gaza,” *Antipode* 48, no. 3 (2016): 763; Sultan Barakat, Sansom Milton, and Ghassan Elkahlout, “Reconstruction Under Siege: The Gaza Strip Since 2007,” *Disasters* 44, no. 3 (2020): 481; Weinthal and Sowers, “Targeting Infrastructure and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza,” 323. See also Barakat et al., “Reconstruction Under Siege,” 482, Smith, “Isolation Through Humanitarianism,” 754, Khalid Manzoor Butt and Anam Abid Butt, “Blockade on Gaza Strip: A Living Hell on Earth,” *Journal of Political Studies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 165, and UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the detailed findings of the independent international Commission of inquiry on the protests in the Occupied Palestinian Territory A/HRC/40/CRP.2* (Geneva, Switzerland: January 2019), 56.

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unemployment, over half the population living below the poverty line, and 62 percent of Gazans as food insecure.<sup>172</sup> The shrinking fishing boundaries, arbitrary no-go zones that restrict arable land, isolation from world trade markets, and prohibitions on construction materials deemed “dual-use” (i.e., cement, iron, steel) multiply the already devastating effects of economic sanctions imposed on Gaza’s de-facto government.<sup>173</sup> Except for Gaza’s black market tunnel economy or Israel’s loosening the blockade to stave off international pressure, Gazans have no other choice but to rely on Israel for most of its electricity and water or on humanitarian organizations to provide state-like services and aid to survive.<sup>174</sup>

Little incentive exists for Israel to lift its crippling siege. So long as Hamas terrorizes Israel and vows its destruction, Gaza remains a “hostile territory” and is treated as such.<sup>175</sup> However, Dr. Ron Smith at Bucknell University importantly contends that regime change (i.e., the overthrow of Hamas) is unlikely to lift the blockade alone, if relief is to be had at all.<sup>176</sup> The occupation of Gaza existed before Hamas’ conception and governance. Instead, Smith concludes that Gaza is populated by a few million Palestinians that “[serve] no purpose to the Israeli government,” and is characterized as a “surplus” population.<sup>177</sup> In other words, Gaza serves as a type of quarantine for a vast population of Arabs. Other scholars argue, “In terms of military aims, there is no conventional siege-related objective in terms of driving out the civilian population to separate people from enemy military forces, but rather a goal of collective punishment.”<sup>178</sup> While these positions may be disputed, the negative effects of the blockade on

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<sup>172</sup> World Bank, “The Rebuilding of Gaza Amid Dire Conditions: Damages, Losses, and Needs,” World Bank, July 6, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/07/06/the-rebuilding-of-gaza-amid-dire-conditions-damage-losses-and-needs>.

<sup>173</sup> Smith, “Isolation Through Humanitarianism,” 760-763 and Barakat et al., “Reconstruction Under Siege,” 485.

<sup>174</sup> Barakat et al., “Reconstruction Under Siege,” 481, 486. See also Weinthal and Sowers, “Targeting Infrastructure and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza,” 320-322.

<sup>175</sup> Weinthal and Sowers, “Targeting Infrastructure and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza,” 333.

<sup>176</sup> Smith, “Isolation Through Humanitarianism,” 753.

<sup>177</sup> Smith, “Isolation Through Humanitarianism,” 752-753.

<sup>178</sup> Barakat et al., “Reconstruction Under Siege,” 481.

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the civilian population are indisputable. The UN Human Rights Council and World Bank report that unless the siege is lifted, Gaza's economy and its citizens will never recover.<sup>179</sup>

Finally, Israeli targeting of critical infrastructure exacerbates the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and prolongs the punishment of its citizens. "Critical infrastructure" here refers to water (including sewage treatment plants), energy, agricultural or fishing areas, and health care facilities. One study found 297 discrete incidents of Israeli targeting of critical infrastructure in Gaza between 2006-2017, the vast majority occurring during the 2014 Gaza war.<sup>180</sup> Of these nearly 300 instances, 49 percent were agricultural, 43 percent in the water sector, and 8 percent in the energy sector.<sup>181</sup> In 2014, the water and sewage plants destroyed by airstrikes left 450,000 Gazans without drinking water and another million affected by the disruption of sewage networks.<sup>182</sup> In 2021, Israel bombed at least three hospitals, electricity and water plants, farmland, and four residential high rises as reported by Israeli Human Rights group *B'tselem*.<sup>183</sup> With complete control over the blockade and its imports, Israel can dictate the terms for Gaza's (re)construction or aid entering the Strip. As seen in the most recent occurrence, that process can sometimes take months.<sup>184</sup>

### *Israel's Need for a Failed, Hostile Gaza*

For the Zionist narrative to triumph over the Palestinian one, the Israeli Right needs Gaza to remain hostile and to eventually fail. Repeated confrontations with Hamas and violent interactions with Gaza's perceived unruly inhabitants give credence to Israel's justifications for colonizing the West Bank. So long as Gaza is hostile and dangerous, it follows (in the Israeli

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<sup>179</sup> UNHRC, *Report of the detailed findings of the independent international Commission of inquiry on the protests in the Occupied Palestinian Territory* A/HRC/40/CRP.2, 46.

<sup>180</sup> Weinthal and Sowers, "Targeting Infrastructure and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza," 334.

<sup>181</sup> Weinthal and Sowers, "Targeting Infrastructure and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza," 334.

<sup>182</sup> Weinthal and Sowers, "Targeting Infrastructure and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza," 335

<sup>183</sup> B'tselem, "Killing blockaded civilians and destroying infrastructure on a massive scale: Israel is committing war crimes in the Gaza Strip," B'tselem, May 15, 2021, [https://www.btselem.org/press\\_releases/20210515\\_israel\\_commits\\_war\\_crimes\\_in\\_gaza](https://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20210515_israel_commits_war_crimes_in_gaza).

<sup>184</sup> Rami, Ayyub, "Israel Approved Qatari Aid to Gaza after May Conflict, Defence Minister Says," *Reuters*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-approves-qatari-aid-gaza-after-may-conflict-defence-minister-says-2021-08-19/>.

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Right perception) that the West Bank and its inhabitants would also become hostile and threatening if the Israeli's withdrew. In other words, the notion of colonizing the West Bank is sold to the Israeli public as a preemptive measure to prevent a second Gaza Strip. One could even speculate that that for some on the Israeli Right, the settlements provide a type of "slow violence" towards Palestinians in the West Bank in the hope that life will be difficult enough that the Palestinians will want to leave.<sup>185</sup>

The reverse is also true. If Hamas and Gazan residents managed to succeed despite the blockade and abandoned violence as a method towards liberation (however unlikely), Israel no longer would have the Holocaust "curtain" of Israeli suffering to hide behind or to justify controversial settlement activities in the West Bank.<sup>186</sup> A functional, non-violent government in Gaza would debunk the Zionist claim that the blockade in Gaza and occupation in the West Bank are necessary to ensure state security. Hamas of course has no intention of relenting its stated cause, and the Israelis are likely counting on that fact to sustain the status quo.

Israel's label of Gaza as a "hostile territory"—the entire territory, not just Hamas—coupled with the siege, intentionally shrinks Palestinians' chances for a sovereign state of their own. Hamas governs 2 million Arabs in the Gaza Strip, 80 percent of which rely on humanitarian aid to live.<sup>187</sup> With no stated conditions for lifting the blockade and with nowhere to go, Gazans suffer the consequences of Hamas-Israeli contentions. Hamas-initiated violence sows devastating retaliation on the Gaza Strip, while desperate conditions in the Strip propagate Hamas' narrative that Israel is the source of Gaza's suffering and that Palestine must be liberated by any means necessary. Until this cycle is broken, the likelihood of a two-state agreement is impossible. In turn, the Palestinian question affects broader Arab-Israeli contentions that will be discussed next.

### **Challenge for Leadership of the *Umma***

At the broader, more strategic level, a third problem fueling the Arab-Israeli cold war is the conflict's utility to Turkey and Iran in challenging Saudi Arabia for leadership of the *umma*. Chapters three and four explore in-depth the separate cold wars between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and

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<sup>185</sup> Weinthal and Sowers, "Targeting Infrastructure and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza," 321.

<sup>186</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 448-449.

<sup>187</sup> UNRWA, "Gaza Strip," accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/gaza-strip>.

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Turkey, but this section focuses on the effect these regional rivals inflict on the Arab-Israeli conflict itself.

The increasing political domination of the AKP and Erdoğan's increasing turn toward Islamist populism in Turkey during the 2010s aggravated the frequently strained relationship Turkey had with Israel, especially following the May 2010 Mavi Marmara incident.<sup>188</sup> President Erdoğan and the AKP openly support Hamas and publicly refer to Israel as "apartheid" and a "terror state."<sup>189</sup> Erdoğan exploited the Palestinian issue to ramp up nationalist feelings of his supporters and perhaps to distract from his government's mismanagement of the economy and aggressive policies towards its minority population, the Kurds.<sup>190</sup> Erdoğan withdrew Turkey's ambassador to Israel in 2018 in the aftermath of Israeli soldiers killing 60 Palestinians that were protesting the United States embassy move to Jerusalem.<sup>191</sup> Turkey and its leadership frequently employ inflammatory rhetoric on the Palestinian issue to present themselves as "a leading power in the Middle East, to gain Islamic legitimacy, and to build an economic infrastructure in the region" according to Ely Karmon and Michael Barak.<sup>192</sup> The retired Turkish ambassador Omer Onhon admits, however, that Turkey's weak regional relationships stifle Erdoğan's ability to influence the Palestinian issue.<sup>193</sup>

Turkish and Iranian support for Hamas directly challenges Saudi Arabia's hegemony over the broader Islamic world, i.e. the *umma*. As two of the three staunchest state-sponsors of

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<sup>188</sup> Alberto Gasparetto, "Iranian-Turkish Relations in a Changing Middle East," *International Studies: Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal* 21, no. 1 (2018): 88, <https://doi.org/10.18778/1641-4233.21.06>. See also "Mavi Marmara: Why did Israel stop the Gaza Flotilla?," BBC News, June 27, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/10203726>.

<sup>189</sup> Karadeniz and Gumrukcu, "Turkey and Israel Expel Envoys Over Gaza Violence," <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-usa-embassy-turkey/turkey-and-israel-expel-envoys-over-gaza-violence-idUSKCN1IG1ZK>; "Turkey's Erdogan Called Israel 'Terror State' over Palestinian Clashes at Al-Aqsa," *Reuters*, May 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-accuses-israel-terror-over-palestinian-clashes-al-aqsa-2021-05-08/>.

<sup>190</sup> Karmon and Barak, "Erdogan's Turkey and the Palestinian Issue," 75, 80.

<sup>191</sup> Tulay Karadeniz and Tuvan Gumrukcu, "Turkey and Israel Expel Envoys Over Gaza Violence," *Reuters*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-usa-embassy-turkey/turkey-and-israel-expel-envoys-over-gaza-violence-idUSKCN1IG1ZK>.

<sup>192</sup> Karmon and Barak, "Erdogan's Turkey and the Palestinian Issue," 75.

<sup>193</sup> Fehim Tastekin, "Can Erdogan Seize on Israeli-Palestinian Crisis to Make Diplomatic Gains?" *Al-Monitor*, May 14, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/can-erdogan-seize-israeli-palestinian-crisis-make-diplomatic-gains>.

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Hamas (Qatar being the distant third), Turkey and Iran promote their respective ideologies via the terrorist group; the AKP views Hamas as a like-minded Islamist party while Iran shares Hamas' vision to annihilate Israel on religious grounds.<sup>194</sup> In theory, Saudi leadership stands with the Palestinian people to protect Islam's third holiest site and leads in the effort to achieve a Palestinian state. Barany, Jones and Guzansky made clear, however, that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states rely on Israel's military deterrence to combat Iran.<sup>195</sup> Riyadh also fears the establishment of an Islamist militant movement on its own soil, in sympathy or coordination with trans-national movements like Hamas.

The May 2021 flare-up between Hamas and Israel at Al-Aqsa tested the Arab world's loyalty to the Palestinian cause. Any leverage the Abraham Accords should have given other Arab states to handle such a crisis as this was absent. The Emirates denounced the violence and called for de-escalation on both sides, but did not take steps to persuade Israel towards deconfliction.<sup>196</sup> The perceived weak responses from Arab leadership to the crisis received criticism from Arab monarchies' citizens, especially in the UAE and other Arab states attempting to normalize relations with Israel.<sup>197</sup> Palestine became less of a priority under Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) in favor of a new form of Saudi nationalism, even if the Saudis unavoidably are tied in rhetoric and ideology to defending Jerusalem's sacred mosque.<sup>198</sup>

Turkey and Iran recognize that influence over Jerusalem's mosque would directly challenge Saudi Arabia's leadership of Islam. Shortly after the conflict began, Erdoğan unapologetically sided with Hamas and the Palestinians when he said, "By attacking the sacred site of all three religions, the terrorist state of Israel has crossed all boundaries. ... If we don't

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<sup>194</sup> Karmon and Barak, "Erdogan's Turkey and the Palestinian Issue," 79.

<sup>195</sup> Barany, "The Gulf Monarchies and Israel," 572. See also Jones and Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies*, 44, 119-120.

<sup>196</sup> Aya Batrawy, "UAE and Israel Press Ahead with Ties After Gaza Cease-fire," *Associated Press*, May 27, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-middle-east-business-israel-palestinian-conflict-lifestyle-cf5054de2ee04e43d0749a91c2e3b6ab>.

<sup>197</sup> Aya Batrawy, "No Longer Silent, Gulf Arab Citizens Express Anger at Israel," *Associated Press*, May 19, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-israel-middle-east-8662c35ae1fac682b47cb08b3cbea2ea>.

<sup>198</sup> Shadi Hamid, "A Separate Peace? What the Gaza Crisis Means for Arab Regimes," *Brookings*, May 16, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/05/16/a-separate-peace-what-the-gaza-crisis-means-for-arab-regimes/>.

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stop the attacks now, everyone will become targets of this savage mentality.”<sup>199</sup> Iranian military commanders praised Hamas’ resistance to Israel and its defense of the Palestinian people.<sup>200</sup> As custodian of Islam’s two holiest sites, the kingdom needed to reassert its religious leadership and respond to the crisis. Hamas delivered on its promise to defend the Palestinian people and Jerusalem, making it easy for Turkey and Iran to side with them. The Saudis could not side with Hamas—a long-time enemy designated as a terrorist group—but it also must tread lightly in its criticisms of Israel, its quasi-security partner in combating Iran. The regime took the middle ground by condemning both polities and called upon the international community to de-escalate the situation.<sup>201</sup>

In the end, none of these regional powers (Turkey, Iran, or Saudi Arabia) negotiated a ceasefire. Egypt—the first Arab state to recognize Israel as a country—managed to diffuse tensions and began plans for the reconstruction of Gaza with the help of the United States.<sup>202</sup> There may be many reasons why Turkey was unsuccessful in its bid to lead the negotiations. At least three reasons are evident. First, Turkey’s treatment of the Kurds within its own country and in Syria does not bode well for negotiating a conflict with a similar dynamic. Second, Erdoğan’s outspokenness in his hatred towards Israel ostracized Turkey from the negotiating table. In the most recent crisis, the international community criticized Erdoğan’s remarks as inflammatory and anti-Semitic.<sup>203</sup> Third, Turkey’s degrading relationships with the West and inability to build strong relations in MENA leave Turkey in the same isolated path it took following the Arab Spring.

Saudi Arabia’s calculated response to the crisis demonstrates Riyadh’s growing disinterest and fatigue towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Referencing Palestinian objections

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<sup>199</sup> Steven Erlanger, “Arab World Condemns Israeli Violence but Takes Little Action,” *New York Times*, May 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/14/world/middleeast/israel-arab.html>.

<sup>200</sup> “Saudi Arabia Condemns Israel for ‘Flagrant Violations’ in Gaza,” *Al-Jazeera*, May 16, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/16/saudi-arabia-condemns-israel-over-flagrant-violations-in-gaza>.

<sup>201</sup> Hamid, “A Separate Peace?” <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/05/16/a-separate-peace-what-the-gaza-crisis-means-for-arab-regimes/>.

<sup>202</sup> Samy Magdy, “Israel, Egypt Talk Truce with Hamas, Rebuilding Gaza Strip,” *Associated Press*, May 30, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/hamas-gaza-strip-africa-egypt-israel-016764b93c8af114ba8fb245f9ed86f4>.

<sup>203</sup> Cengiz Candar, “Israel-Hamas Conflict Exposes Turkey’s Irrelevance in the Region,” *Al-Monitor*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/israel-hamas-conflict-exposes-turkeys-irrelevance-region>.

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to President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, MbS reportedly said "It is about time the Palestinians take the proposals and agree to come to the negotiations table or shut up and stop complaining."<sup>204</sup> The crown prince acknowledged that the Israelis have a right to their land, but that Saudis have a vested interest in protecting Jerusalem's holy Al-Aqsa Mosque.<sup>205</sup> Interestingly, a June 2021 poll of Saudi citizens mirrored changing attitudes towards Palestine and Hamas in the aftermath of May 2021's hostilities. The poll showed that 23 percent of respondents supported Hamas, up from 11 percent in November 2020, and 46 percent of the respondents approved of Hamas' rocket launches into Israel.<sup>206</sup> Arab Citizens of Israel similarly share newfound respect for Hamas and its resistance towards Israel, as discussed in the next section.

### Discontent Among the Arab-Israelis

The growing resentment of Arab-Israelis towards the Jewish nation-state constitutes the fourth problem fueling the Arab-Israeli conflict. Arab citizens of Israel (also referred to as Israeli-Arabs, Palestinian-Israelis, or sometimes just Palestinians) make up approximately 21 percent of Israel's population.<sup>207</sup> They legally share the same rights as Jewish-Israelis but are exempt from the military enlistment obligation. Also included in this percentage are approximately 300,000 "permanent residents" in East Jerusalem who theoretically have access to all the same benefits as an Israeli citizen, but they cannot vote in national elections nor possess an Israeli passport.<sup>208</sup> In reality, however, Arab-Israelis and permanent residents in East

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<sup>204</sup> "MBS: Palestinians Should 'Accept Trump Proposals or Shut Up,'" *Al-Jazeera*, April 30, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/30/mbs-palestinians-should-accept-trump-proposals-or-shut-up>.

<sup>205</sup> "Saudi Crown Prince Says Israelis Have a Right to Their Own Land," *Reuters*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-prince-israel/saudi-crown-prince-says-israelis-have-right-to-their-own-land-idUSKCN1H91SQ>.

<sup>206</sup> David Pollock and Austin Corona, "Recent Saudi Poll: Increased Support for Moderate Islam, Hamas, and Ties with Arab Partners," *Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/recent-saudi-poll-increased-support-moderate-islam-hamas-and-ties-arab-partners>.

<sup>207</sup> Kali Robinson, "What to Know About the Arab Citizens of Israel," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-know-about-arab-citizens-israel>.

<sup>208</sup> Robinson, "What to Know About the Arab Citizens of Israel," <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-know-about-arab-citizens-israel>.

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Jerusalem are heavily discriminated against and are often treated as second-class or “other” by the Israeli far-Right Jewish population. Dr. Lana Tatour at Columbia University contends that citizenship for Arabs in Israel was never guaranteed or desirable in the first place. She argues that Israel granted citizenship to the 1948 Palestinians as a domination tactic, as an “instrument of ethnic cleansing” to solidify the demographics of the *Nakba*, and as a method of annexation.<sup>209</sup> While the Israeli government and some of the international community dispute these criticisms, the Arab-Israelis likely share Tatour’s perception.

Arab citizens of Israel are twice as likely to live in poverty compared to Jews, struggle to find jobs and basic services, live in crime-ridden cities, and are underrepresented in politics.<sup>210</sup> Between 2017 and 2021, the murder rate in predominantly Arab neighborhoods spiked 50 percent due to the increased proliferation of illegal weapons, tribal violence, and little policing.<sup>211</sup> Dr. Guy Ben-Porat, Professor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, wrote that Arab citizens in Israel historically suffered from over-policing but now suffer twice as much from under-policing in their neighborhoods.<sup>212</sup> He further observed:

The rising violence in Arab communities is described by Arab leaders as a social disaster and an existential threat. The collapse of traditional sources of authority and family structure, common to societies in transition, created a vacuum of authority in Arab society. This vacuum is coupled with economic and social marginality, breeding frustration. And finally, the availability of illegal weapons and the rise of organized crime combine to make Arab neighborhoods unsafe.<sup>213</sup>

In cities with a mixed Jewish and Arab presence, Arab-Israelis report hostility and unfair treatment from all levels of government down to law enforcement officers who view them as a

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<sup>209</sup> Lana Tatour, "Citizenship as Domination: Settler colonialism and the Making of Palestinian Citizenship in Israel," *Arab Studies Journal* 27, no. 2 (Fall, 2019): 13, 14, 24, 19-20, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/citizenship-as-domination-settler-colonialism/docview/2385748777/se-2?accountid=10504>.

<sup>210</sup> Robinson, “What to Know About the Arab Citizens of Israel,” <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-know-about-arab-citizens-israel>.

<sup>211</sup> Yaacov Benmeleh, “How Israel’s Arab Citizens Fare in an Unequal Society,” *Bloomberg*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-25/how-israel-s-arab-citizens-fare-in-an-unequal-society-quicktake>.

<sup>212</sup> Guy Ben-Porat, “To Be Served and Protected: Israeli Arab Citizens and the Police,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 6-9.

<sup>213</sup> Ben-Porat, “To Be Served and Protected,” 9.

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security threat.<sup>214</sup> These unresolved grievances perpetuate violence between Jewish and Arab citizens. The events leading up to May's 11 days of airstrikes and rocket fire demonstrate these tensions. Israel's attempt to remove eight Palestinian families from their homes in East Jerusalem and the Israeli police raid at Al-Aqsa Mosque sparked mass protest and riots across Israel among Israel's Arab population.

Israeli evictions of Palestinians—most of them in “permanent resident” status—are not new. Residency status for “permanent residents” can legally be revoked by the Ministry of the Interior, and 14,000 Palestinians have been evicted since 1967 as of June 2021.<sup>215</sup> Israel, however, does not view the resettlement of Palestinians as a national matter but as a private property dispute between long-time Arab residents and Jewish property owners. The Palestinians reject Israeli ownership of the property, claiming the land was granted to them by Jordan following the 1948 war.<sup>216</sup> As permanent residents possess little political power to dispute property claims, the Palestinians must rely on the PA to intercede. When the PA did not intervene, Hamas seized the opportunity to demonstrate the group's commitment to the Palestinian people and reject Israeli sovereignty.

Arab-Israelis' traditional unwillingness to participate or influence Israeli politics, and Palestinian discontent with the PA, lies at the heart of recurring contentions between Arabs and Jews in Israel. The Nation-State law passed May 1, 2018 revoked Arabic as an official language, potentially handicapping many Arabs in the political sphere.<sup>217</sup> The law declares Hebrew as the only official language for all government, judicial, and administrative affairs and states that “the State of Israel is the national homeland of the Jewish people.”<sup>218</sup> Former Prime Minister

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<sup>214</sup> Antonia Noori Farzan, “Arab Israelis are rising up to protest. Here's what you need to know about their status in the country,” *Washington Post*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/13/arab-israeli-faq/>.

<sup>215</sup> Robinson, “What to Know About the Arab Citizens of Israel,” <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-know-about-arab-citizens-israel>.

<sup>216</sup> “Sheikh Jarrah: Palestinians and Israelis Baulk at Evictions Compromise,” *BBC News*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-58024060>.

<sup>217</sup> Salma Arraf-Baker, “The Nation-State Law and the Deprivation of the Arabic Language from Official Status in Israel,” *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics, and Culture; East Jerusalem* 24, no. 3 (2019): 181.

<sup>218</sup> Arraf-Baker, “The Nation-State Law,” 181.

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Netanyahu emphasized this point of the law in his social media, hoping to rally support from his base before the 2019 elections.<sup>219</sup> Beyond government functions, Arab city names are sometimes “Hebraized,” licensing exams for white-collar jobs are offered only in Hebrew or English, and grade school courses through most of Israel are taught exclusively in Hebrew.<sup>220</sup> Eliminating the Arab language from the political process and schooling marginalizes Arab involvement and thus hinders progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Here implores the question of whether the marginalization of Arab-Israelis (and Palestinians broadly) can be appropriately classified as “apartheid.” Human Rights Watch (HRW) published its 224-page report on this question in April 2021. Their conclusion is the following:

Human Rights Watch concludes that the Israeli government has demonstrated an intent to maintain the domination of Jewish Israelis over Palestinians across Israel and the [Occupied Palestinian Territories]. In the OPT, including East Jerusalem, that intent has been coupled with systematic oppression of Palestinians and inhumane acts committed against them. When these three elements occur together, they amount to the crime of apartheid.<sup>221</sup>

A key statement in HRW’s conclusion is their finding that apartheid is present “across Israel and the OPT.” In other words, HRW would agree that Arab-Israelis—who live within Israel—are subject to apartheid. Law professor and essayist Thane Rosenbaum vehemently opposes this view, however, arguing that because Arab-Israelis are represented in the Knesset, have freedom of speech and religion, and “[benefit] from the economic opportunities available to all,” they “would [never] think to leave Israel for another country with a Muslim majority.”<sup>222</sup> While there may be more opportunities for Arab-Israelis than Palestinians in the OPT, those opportunities are shrinking amid increasingly discriminatory laws, policies, and practices as outlined above. If the

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<sup>219</sup> Oliver Homes and Sufian Taha, “‘He’s using his last bullet’: Israeli Arabs Condemn Netanyahu Comments,” *Guardian*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/11/hes-using-his-last-bullet-israeli-arabs-condemn-netanyahu-comments> and “Benjamin Netanyahu says Israel is ‘not a State of all its citizens,’” *Guardian*, March 10, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/10/benjamin-netanyahu-says-israel-is-not-a-state-of-all-its-citizens>.

<sup>220</sup> Arraf-Baker, “The Nation-State Law,” 184-186.

<sup>221</sup> Human Rights Watch, “A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution,” *Human Rights Watch*, April 27, 2021, 9, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>.

<sup>222</sup> Rosenbaum, “Zionism,” 120-121.

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rioting and demonstrations are any indicators, the Arab-Israelis certainly do not seem to share Rosenbaum's and other like-minded scholars' perspectives.

Ironically, Palestinian involvement in Israeli politics became crucial in the aftermath of the 11 days of violence between Hamas and Israel. The United Arab List (UAL), an Islamist party, joined the predominantly Jewish coalition to oust Benjamin Netanyahu.<sup>223</sup> Shared hatred of Netanyahu, albeit for different reasons, appeared to loosely unite the coalition. The head of the UAL party, Mansour Abbas, is the first Arab representative to ever sit on an Israeli governing coalition and sought to repeal laws that disproportionately discriminated against Arab-Israelis.<sup>224</sup> Unfortunately, the hard-line opposition forced the dissolution of the coalition in June 2022 by threatening to repeal Israeli settlers' special status in the West Bank.<sup>225</sup> Loss of this legal status to the 500,000 Israelis living in the West Bank would essentially treat them like the 2.5 million Palestinians surrounding them—subject to military courts, devoid of some public services, and unable to practice law.<sup>226</sup> Before letting the special status lapse (after 55-years of renewals), the coalition government dissolved parliament and will likely schedule new parliamentary elections in October 2022.<sup>227</sup>

For the Palestinians' part, trust in President Mahmoud Abbas eroded significantly in the months leading up to the May 2021 conflict and in the months following. Parliamentary and presidential elections set for May 22, 2021, were canceled indefinitely by Abbas on April 30, 2021, citing uncertainty about Jerusalem citizens' ability to vote.<sup>228</sup> Palestinians, especially the

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<sup>223</sup> "Israeli Politicians Say They Have Reached a Deal That Would Oust Netanyahu," *NPR*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/1002631402/israeli-politicians-say-they-have-reached-a-deal-to-oust-netanyahu>.

<sup>224</sup> Raf Sanchez, "An Unlikely Trio Put Aside Huge Differences for One Goal: Ousting Netanyahu," *NBC News*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/unlikely-trio-put-aside-huge-differences-one-goal-oust-netanyahu-n1269459>.

<sup>225</sup> Federman, "Israel to Dissolve Parliament," [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-coalition-agrees-to-dissolve-hold-new-elections/2022/06/20/4a2d0be2-f0b6-11ec-ac16-8fbf7194cd78\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-coalition-agrees-to-dissolve-hold-new-elections/2022/06/20/4a2d0be2-f0b6-11ec-ac16-8fbf7194cd78_story.html).

<sup>226</sup> Joseph Krauss, "Israeli Settlers at Risk of Losing Special West Bank Status," *Associated Press*, June 10, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-middle-east-jerusalem-west-bank-government-and-politics-7b6536cf8513d9ccc3a3bad36ca1c04e>.

<sup>227</sup> Federman, "Israel to Dissolve Parliament," [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-coalition-agrees-to-dissolve-hold-new-elections/2022/06/20/4a2d0be2-f0b6-11ec-ac16-8fbf7194cd78\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-coalition-agrees-to-dissolve-hold-new-elections/2022/06/20/4a2d0be2-f0b6-11ec-ac16-8fbf7194cd78_story.html).

<sup>228</sup> "Palestinian Leader Delays Parliamentary and Presidential Elections, Blaming Israel," *Reuters*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/palestinian-elections-delayed-says-president-mahmoud-abbas-2021-04-29/>.

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younger population, are skeptical of Abbas' motives and see the delay as an attempt to prolong possible defeat to Hamas.<sup>229</sup> In June 2021, political activist and fierce opponent of the Abbas regime, Nizar Banat, died while in Palestinian custody fueling anger and protests in the West Bank. Some Palestinians, including Banat, accused Abbas of corruption, abuse of power, and crony capitalist practices.<sup>230</sup> Elections have not been held since Hamas won the parliamentary elections in 2006, which led to the present geographical isolation of the West Bank and Gaza. The removal of Abbas from power generates new possibilities for the Palestinians and could change the trajectory of the Arab-Israeli cold war. These new possibilities will be discussed in the estimate at the end of this chapter.

### **Shifting Public Opinion Favoring Palestine**

The fifth and final problem fueling the Arab-Israeli cold war is the shifting public opinion in the United States and globally that creates more solidarity with the Palestinians. This trend manifests itself in two ways. First, the general U.S. population is more willing to accept the Palestinian narrative in the wake of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that gained traction after the death of African American George Floyd in May 2020. Second, the Democratic party is more willing to raise concerns in Congress about U.S. military aid and weapon supply to Israel. These two factors elevate the Palestinian perspective and voice in political circles, mounting increasing pressure on the Executive Branch to view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a human rights issue rather than a state-building one. The media portrayal of the Israeli and Palestinian narratives plays a vital role in this shift of public opinion.

Israeli-Palestinian issues quickly make news headlines and flood social media platforms, but traditionally there is a great disparity in which side's grievances air and their portrayal. A

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<sup>229</sup> "Palestinian Leader Delays Parliamentary and Presidential Elections," <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/palestinian-elections-delayed-says-president-mahmoud-abbas-2021-04-29/>.

<sup>230</sup> Joel Greenberg, "Nizar Banat: Palestinians Turn on Leaders After Activist's Death," *BBC News*, July 3, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57694104>. See also, Dana Tariq, "Crony Capitalism in the Palestinian Authority: A Deal Among Friends," *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2020): 250-251, 256-257, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1618705>.

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2018 study found that multiple factors affect successful media portrayal of either the Israeli or Palestinian narrative.<sup>231</sup> According to Dr. Moran Yarchi at Haifa University,

The strongest predictors for the way in which the conflict was reported on were the focal event factors. The number of Palestinian casualties and military action against the Palestinians contributes to the appearance of Palestinian frames in the foreign presses coverage, ... while Israeli casualties (marginal significant) and terror attacks against Israelis contribute to the appearance of Israeli frames of the coverage.<sup>232</sup>

This finding is enlightening when considering the most recent flare-up. Of the 254 deaths that occurred during the 11-day conflict, 243 were Palestinian including 66 children, 39 women, and 17 seniors.<sup>233</sup> The remaining 12 deaths were Israeli citizens and one service member. In line with Yarchi's conclusion, news agencies and social media platforms looped powerful footage of Gaza's destruction by Israeli airstrikes. Headlines increasingly drew attention to Palestinian civilian casualties and their suffering.<sup>234</sup>

Palestinians took control of the narrative early in the conflict by sharing videos, photos, and personal accounts of their experience via social media and messaging platforms. One Gaza-based Palestinian reported, "Much like with the Black Lives Matter movement, where it was a lot more horrifying to witness George Floyd dying than to read about it, being able to witness the atrocities means that it runs counter to the mainstream narratives that we're seeing on TV."<sup>235</sup> Some living in the Gaza Strip point to the BLM movement as setting the stage for greater Palestinian activism online. Social media activists hope that the media will capture what

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<sup>231</sup> Moran Yarchi, "Two Stories for Two Nations: Public Diplomacy in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 9 (2018): 677-695. Note that Yarchi defines "successful" media coverage of an event as coverage that is "framed in a way that supports positions that are favorable to one side in the conflict or detrimental to the other." See Yarchi, "Two Stories for Two Nations," 678.

<sup>232</sup> Yarchi, "Two Stories for Two Nations," 689.

<sup>233</sup> Jack Khoury, "Death Toll in Gaza Continues to Rise as Bodies Pulled from Rubble," *Haaretz*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-death-toll-in-gaza-continues-to-rise-as-bodies-pulled-from-rubble-1.9831927>.

<sup>234</sup> See "Israel-Gaza Violence: Calls to Protect Civilians as Conflict Endures," *BBC News*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57148097> and "Gaza: Apparent War Crimes During May Fighting," *Human Rights Watch*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/27/gaza-apparent-war-crimes-during-may-fighting>.

<sup>235</sup> Sam Cabral, "Israel-Gaza: Young Americans on the Conflict – and Online Activism," *BBC News*, May 18, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57161927>.

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Palestinians view as settler colonialism, apartheid, and genocide of their race.<sup>236</sup> Others argue that an American context such as the Black Lives Matter movement is not fair and cannot be holistically applied to the conflict. They contend that Israeli-Palestinian histories and contexts differ substantially from BLM objectives and that “boiling it down to one side is an oppressor and the other is a victim is never the answer.”<sup>237</sup>

American citizens criticized the Biden administration’s handling of the May conflict and U.S. support for perceived Israeli oppression in general. The Washington Post reported several Muslim-American advocacy groups condemning President Biden’s Eid event, stating that the administration was “complicit” in “Palestinian suffering.”<sup>238</sup> Over one thousand people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC a few weeks after the ceasefire under the banner “Sanction Israel.” The Managing Director for American Muslims for Palestine (AMP), who organized the protest, stated that the three goals of the march were “ending all weapon deliveries to Israel, holding Israel accountable for war crimes, and ending the U.S.-Israel free trade agreement, along with any imports of settlement goods [into the United States].”<sup>239</sup> Other Americans participated in less formal or less organized ways through social media campaigns. Ramzey Baroud, a guest on University of Michigan professor Juan Cole’s *Informed Comment*, wrote:

... as racial justice has become one of the most emotive subjects in US politics, many Americans are now seeing the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupation through the prism of the fight by millions of Americans for their own racial equality. Social media hashtag #PalestinianLivesMatter continues to trend alongside #BlackLivesMatter; communal solidarity and intersectionality prevail over selfish politics, wherein only money matters.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Cabral, “Israel-Gaza: Young Americans on the Conflict,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57161927>.

<sup>237</sup> Cabral, “Israel-Gaza: Young Americans on the Conflict,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57161927>.

<sup>238</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, “The U.S. Conversation on Israel is Changing, No Matter Biden’s Stance,” *Washington Post*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/17/biden-israel-palestinians-change/>.

<sup>239</sup> “Large Crowd Gathers for Palestine in Washington, DC,” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (June/July 2021): 58-59.

<sup>240</sup> Ramzy Baroud, “Despite Israel Lobbies’ Power in Congress, for a New Generation Sympathy with Oppressed Palestinians is becoming New Normal,” *Informed Comment* (blog), October 6, 2021, <https://www.juancole.com/2021/10/generation-oppressed-palestinians.html>.

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Several recent polls corroborate the American populace's attitudinal shift towards solidarity with the Palestinians. In March 2021, three months before the deadly Israeli-Hamas exchange, a Gallup poll found that while the general U.S. population still favors Israel concerning the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a record 30 percent of Americans have a favorable view of the PA and 25 percent of Americans sympathize more with the Palestinians than with the Israelis.<sup>241</sup> A similar poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in April 2019 found that a substantial majority of Americans (64 percent) say they have a favorable opinion of the Israeli people, but fewer than half (41 percent) have a favorable view of the Israeli government.<sup>242</sup> The Pew survey also found this trend mirrored for Palestinians. The public expressed more positive views of the Palestinian people (46 percent), but only 19 percent favored the Palestinian government.<sup>243</sup> These two surveys collectively demonstrate an additional trend: Americans tend to sympathize more with the people of these two polities, rather than with the governments or states themselves. Viewing the conflict through the lens of the Palestinian citizens transitions the conflict towards a "social justice frame."<sup>244</sup>

Democratic lawmakers are now more willing to represent these progressive views on Palestine in Congress. Before formalizing the Abraham Accords in 2020, Democrats threatened to condition the approximately \$3.8 billion in military funding to Israel to ensure none of those funds supported Netanyahu's planned unilateral annexation of parts of the West Bank and to withhold funds for offshore procurement of Israeli weapons.<sup>245</sup> The Israelis agreed to table

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<sup>241</sup> Lydia Saad, "Americans Still Favor Israel While Warming to Palestinians," *Gallup*, March 19, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/340331/americans-favor-israel-warming-palestinians.aspx>.

<sup>242</sup> "U.S. Public Has Favorable View of Israel's People, but is Less Positive Toward Its Government," *Pew Research Center*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/04/24/u-s-public-has-favorable-view-of-israels-people-but-is-less-positive-toward-its-government/>.

<sup>243</sup> "U.S. Public Has Favorable View of Israel's People, but is Less Positive Toward Its Government," <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/04/24/u-s-public-has-favorable-view-of-israels-people-but-is-less-positive-toward-its-government/>.

<sup>244</sup> Tharoor, "The U.S. Conversation on Israel is Changing, No Matter Biden's Stance," <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/17/biden-israel-palestinians-change/>.

<sup>245</sup> Congressional Research Service, "U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel (RL33222)," prepared by Jeremy M. Sharp, November 16, 2020, 43, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33222/41>.

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annexation of the West Bank territories in exchange for formal diplomatic relations with the UAE.<sup>246</sup>

The Democratic position to pressure Israel starkly contrasts with Republicans. Republicans favor greater pressure on the Palestinians to solve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and less than half of Republicans favor an independent Palestinian state.<sup>247</sup> The 2021 Gallup poll tracks the emerging trend among Democrats that it is no longer taboo to question Israeli actions against Palestinians. According to Gallup, “Nearly two-thirds of Democrats view Israel favorably, but two-thirds also favor Palestinian statehood, less than half sympathize more with Israel in the dispute, and the majority want the U.S. to put more pressure on Israel.”<sup>248</sup> Peter Beinart, editor-at-large of *Jewish Currents* explained in an NPR interview late-May 2021 that Democrats are becoming more comfortable promoting the Palestinian narrative despite heavy pro-Israel lobbying now that several pro-Palestinian politicians have not had any trouble getting reelected.<sup>249</sup> In fact, some argue that defending Palestinians in American political circles may soon become the more “politically correct” thing to do.<sup>250</sup>

President Biden delivered his remarks after the Egyptian-brokered ceasefire on May 20, 2021. The president said, “I believe the Palestinians and Israelis equally deserve to live safely and securely and to enjoy equal measures of freedom, prosperity, and democracy. My administration will continue our quiet and relentless diplomacy toward that end.”<sup>251</sup> In reflecting on this statement, Yasmeeen Serhan in her article for the *Atlantic* emphasized the subtle but

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<sup>246</sup> CRS, “U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel (RL33222), 43, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33222/41>.

<sup>247</sup> Saad, “Americans Still Favor Israel While Warming to Palestinians,” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/340331/americans-favor-israel-warming-palestinians.aspx>.

<sup>248</sup> Saad, “Americans Still Favor Israel While Warming to Palestinians,” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/340331/americans-favor-israel-warming-palestinians.aspx>.

<sup>249</sup> Audie Cornish, “Liberal American Attitudes Are Starting to Shift on Israelis and Palestinians,” *NPR*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/21/999241551/liberal-american-attitudes-are-starting-to-shift-on-israelis-and-palestinians>.

<sup>250</sup> Baroud, “Despite Israel Lobbies’ Power in Congress, for a New Generation Sympathy with Oppressed Palestinians is becoming New Normal,” <https://www.juancole.com/2021/10/generation-oppressed-palestinians.html>.

<sup>251</sup> Joseph Biden, *Remarks by President Biden on the Middle East*, White House, May 20, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/05/20/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-middle-east/>.

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important use of the word “equal” in President Biden’s statement.<sup>252</sup> Serhan interprets the deliberate use of the word “equal” as a reflection of the pressure the Biden Administration faces from policymakers and the public to frame the conflict as a humanitarian issue.<sup>253</sup> She sums up her article stating, “Today, more and more U.S. lawmakers believe that the lopsided power dynamic between the Israelis and the Palestinians will sustain the conflict. They also argue that unless the U.S. uses its unique leverage to address these issues, a return of the kind of violence witnessed over the past couple of weeks is inevitable.”<sup>254</sup>

### Estimate

The May 2021 confrontations and 2020 Abraham Accords might indicate the potential for greater unification between Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. However, such unification seems unlikely at the present moment, because despite the same notional goal of both Hamas and the Palestinian Authority for defending the Palestinian people, Hamas has been able to create the public perception of sincerity and ideological commitment while Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority has not.<sup>255</sup> This, compounded by Abbas’ postponement of the 2021 April legislative and July presidential elections, diminished trust in the Fatah regime, leaving younger Palestinians to look towards Hamas as a security provider.<sup>256</sup> The Arab monarchies fear unification between Fatah and the Muslim Brotherhood-influenced Hamas in the form of shared control of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and they fear further Palestinian support of

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<sup>252</sup> Yasmeen Serhan, “A New World is Defining the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Washington,” *Atlantic*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/05/biden-israel-gaza-hamas-ceasefire/618949/>.

<sup>253</sup> Serhan, “A New World is Defining the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Washington,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/05/biden-israel-gaza-hamas-ceasefire/618949/>.

<sup>254</sup> Serhan, “A New World is Defining the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Washington,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/05/biden-israel-gaza-hamas-ceasefire/618949/>.

<sup>255</sup> Karsh, “Hamas Doesn’t Want a Palestinian State,” <https://spectatorworld.com/topic/hamas-doesnt-want-palestinian-state/>; Witte and Taha, “Palestinian support for Hamas surges after its confrontation with Israel,” [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/hamas-israel-west-bank-abbas/2021/06/03/cf19f2cc-c275-11eb-89a4-b7ae22aa193e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/hamas-israel-west-bank-abbas/2021/06/03/cf19f2cc-c275-11eb-89a4-b7ae22aa193e_story.html); Cole, “Israel’s Pyrrhic Victory,” <https://www.juancole.com/2021/05/buildings-reinforced-palestinian.html>.

<sup>256</sup> Daniel Estrin, “Palestinian Authority Postpones Parliamentary Elections,” *NPR*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/29/992065009/palestinian-authority-postpones-parliamentary-elections>.

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Hamas in general. Should the Fatah-Hamas dispute be reconciled, or Hamas win future elections, the Muslim Brotherhood-influenced Hamas—whom the Arab monarchs and the United States deem a terrorist organization—would sit at the heart of a supposedly democratic Palestine. Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt must constantly calculate which reality they fear more: an unrealized Palestinian state or a realized Palestinian democracy potentially governed by an enemy. Other scholars are more hopeful, looking at the future removal of Abbas as a “reset” for a conflict dominated for over a decade by two perceived corrupt Palestinian and Israeli leaders.<sup>257</sup>

Egypt’s negotiated ceasefire agreement is not likely to have any lasting effect. On July 15, 2021, Hamas sent an incendiary balloon across the Israeli-Gaza border in violent protest to the Israeli ultra-nationalist parade throughout the Old City. In response, the Israeli Defense Force carried out an airstrike on an alleged military compound in Gaza the next day.<sup>258</sup> On January 1, 2022, two rockets originating from Gaza fell off the coast of Tel Aviv, prompting the Israeli Defense Forces to respond with airstrikes.<sup>259</sup> Despite Egypt-led ongoing negotiations for a lasting peace between Israel and Hamas, the five main factors driving this cold war remain. The two brief examples just listed are evidence that temporary ceasefires do nothing to address the underlying problems that fuel this conflict.

The trajectory of this conflict between the Israelis and Arabs is difficult to predict given the infrequent nature of its flare-ups. However, the Abraham Accords, ceasefire (albeit temporary), growing distrust and resentment of Mahmoud Abbas among Palestinians, and the possibility of a new Israeli parliament, may create positive change in a way that this cold war hasn’t had the chance to for fifteen years under the far-Right leadership of Netanyahu. During his 15-year tenure, Netanyahu convinced world leaders that he was open to a two-state solution while degrading that possibility over time through his actions.<sup>260</sup> However, Netanyahu may have

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<sup>257</sup> Ophir Falk, “The Middle East Accords, an Israeli Perspective,” *American Diplomacy*, November 1, 2020, <https://americandiplomacy.web.unc.edu/2020/11/the-middle-east-accords-an-israeli-perspective/>.

<sup>258</sup> Paulina Villegas and Michael E., “Israeli airstrike hit Gaza in retaliation for incendiary balloons, in first flare-up since May truce,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/06/15/israel-gaza-airstrikes-hamas/>.

<sup>259</sup> Steve Hendrix, “Israel Strikes Hamas Targets in Gaza Following Rocket Launches,” *Washington Post*, January 2, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/02/israel-gaza-strikes-hamas/>.

<sup>260</sup> Laura King, “Benjamin Netanyahu ruled Israel as a man of many faces,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-06-13/israel-netanyahu-legacy>.

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another chance to deepen the Israeli-Palestinian wedge if he wins the upcoming parliamentary elections. Former foreign minister and current interim prime minister Yair Lapid is likely Netanyahu's greatest opposition.<sup>261</sup> But while Netanyahu and his party benefited from a divided Palestine, the new government (whoever might lead it) may not enjoy the same disunity.<sup>262</sup>

Should the Palestinian elections (if they indeed happen) turn in Hamas' favor, this conflict will likely escalate on all sides. Palestinians are beginning to consider Hamas as a viable alternative to the Abbas regime. The Israelis may take further kinetic action against the Palestinians and Gaza using Hamas' label as a terrorist organization to justify it. The Arab monarchies have a more difficult choice. They ultimately must side with the Palestinians but somehow degrade Hamas while doing so. In extreme circumstances, the Arab monarchies (including Jordan) may need to form a temporary alternative government to Hamas to prevent open warfare between a terrorist-led Palestine bent on destroying the Gulf's strongest military deterrent to Iran.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 channeled new-found hope for Hamas and like-minded resistance movements. Hamas viewed the complete withdrawal as evidence for a successful "20-year jihad" against "the occupation," and offered that the Taliban's success "is proof that the popular resistance, mainly [the] Palestinian militant people, will triumph and achieve the goals of freedom and return."<sup>263</sup> Ibrahim al-Madhoun, a political analyst close to Hamas, expects that Palestinians could become encouraged by the perceived Taliban overthrow of U.S. and Afghan forces and may escalate efforts to repel Israeli occupation and oppression.<sup>264</sup> As Palestinians become increasingly critical of the PA and latch on to Hamas' leadership, U.S. intervention in the Arab-Israeli conflict will prove to be more complicated.

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<sup>261</sup> Federman, "Israel to Dissolved Parliament," [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-coalition-agrees-to-dissolve-hold-new-elections/2022/06/20/4a2d0be2-f0b6-11ec-ac16-8fbf7194cd78\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-coalition-agrees-to-dissolve-hold-new-elections/2022/06/20/4a2d0be2-f0b6-11ec-ac16-8fbf7194cd78_story.html).

<sup>262</sup> Witte and Taha, "Palestinian support for Hamas surges after its confrontation with Israel," [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/hamas-israel-west-bank-abbas/2021/06/03/cf19f2cc-c275-11eb-89a4-b7ae22aa193e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/hamas-israel-west-bank-abbas/2021/06/03/cf19f2cc-c275-11eb-89a4-b7ae22aa193e_story.html).

<sup>263</sup> Entsar Abu Jahal, "Hamas Welcomes Taliban's Triumph in Afghanistan," *Al-Monitor*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/hamas-welcomes-talibans-triumph-afghanistan>.

<sup>264</sup> Abu Jahal, "Hamas Welcomes Taliban's Triumph in Afghanistan," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/hamas-welcomes-talibans-triumph-afghanistan>.

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Finally, change in Gaza will almost certainly not occur without persuasion from the United States and its allies. Dr. Galen Jackson argued that the Johnson administration only supported Resolution 242 in 1967 once he decided “that there was no way to pressure the Israelis to leave the territories they had occupied...” and “that [pressuring Israel to withdraw] would have serious domestic political repercussions.”<sup>265</sup> Unlike American public opinion and Congress in 1967, perceptions on Palestinian and Israeli suffering are shifting in favor of the Palestinians as shown above.<sup>266</sup> As such, there may be an opportunity in the next decade to improve quality of life for innocent Gazans with the support of U.S. policymakers, while still ensuring Israel’s security.

After fifteen years of isolation and cyclical violence between Hamas and Israel, the status quo in Gaza remains the same: thousands of innocent lives lost, millions negatively impacted, and the solution is nowhere to be found. Gaza is unlikely to survive through 2030 without reprieve of the blockade and without viable critical infrastructure. Maintaining the “status quo” may work for Jerusalem, but not for Gaza. By understanding and addressing each of the five underlying problems of this conflict, including alleviating the desperate conditions in Gaza where possible, the United States could make positive strides to improve or solve the Palestinian question.

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<sup>265</sup> Galen Jackson, “The Johnson Administration and Arab-Israeli Peacemaking after June 1967,” *Middle East Journal* 74, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 204.

<sup>266</sup> Jackson, “The Johnson Administration and Arab-Israeli Peacemaking after 1967,” 204.

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## CHAPTER 3

## THE SAUDI-IRAN META COLD WAR

The Saudi-Iranian meta conflict is widely thought to destabilize the MENA region more than any other cold war, and the drivers causing the conflict will probably project further turmoil through 2030.<sup>267</sup> Four overarching structures protract this rivalry and shape its grim trajectory into 2030. The first driver is the existential need of Saudi and Iranian leaders to delegitimize one another regarding their irreconcilable models of Islamic governance, creating a win-lose conflict paradigm, i.e. a zero-sum game. The second driver is how the increased use of the Salafist doctrine of *takfirism*—used to delegitimize the Iranian regime—will increase the likelihood of Islamist extremism and violent Iranian counter-ideologies. Third, the accelerating arms race between the kingdom and its nuclearizing foe instills heightened paranoia in both regimes, increasing the possibility of a direct conflict or escalation in their existing proxy wars. And fourth, the stark economic disparities between Saudi Arabia and Iran markedly shape the respective leader’s strategies to compete and maintain fiscal solvency and generous public subsidies over the next decade as the world transitions away from dependence on fossil fuels. Geopolitical factors such as the JCPOA re-negotiations, Russia-Ukraine war, and perceived U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East offer new opportunities and difficulties for both Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Détente cannot be reached between these powerful rivals without one of the regimes surrendering religious and governance superiority. Surrender of perceived authority is unlikely to occur given decades of power competition and irreconcilable ideologies. Further, the disproportionate attention these regimes devote to discrediting the other extracts a toll on their respective domestic populations. Civil war is possible and perhaps likely in both countries following the death of Saudi Arabia’s and Iran’s aged rulers, causing further instability in weak states where the two rivals compete. MbS’ reforms, reckless spending, and brutal power consolidation threatens his future kingship. Supreme Leader Khamenei represses reform at home and exports Khomeini’s revolution at the expense of the Iranian people, as will be shown.

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<sup>267</sup> Peter Salisbury, “Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian ‘Cold War’,” *Chatham House*, February 2015, 2, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field\\_document/20150218YemenIranSaudi.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20150218YemenIranSaudi.pdf); Gause III, “Beyond Sectarianism,” 3.

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MbS preaches a more moderate Islam, but his reforms have done little to quell *takfiri* teachings. Tolerating this brand of extremist religious ideology has obvious domestic security risks, but MbS likely views the Shia-hating, *takfiri* militants as an inadvertent ally in the Saudi regime's religious war with Iran. The Iranian regime, in turn, labels all *takfiris* as Saudi-bred terrorists to ideologically unify its militias. This tactic is used by the supreme leader to justify his forward defense policy claiming to be protecting Shia Muslims regionally.

The Saudi and Iranian arms race temporarily acts as a way to channel the conflict into conventional deterrence, though it increases the likelihood of a war over time. One study (2020) found that excessive arming "improves a state's prospects in war and thereby strengthens the state's coercive power, enabling it to better secure its interests."<sup>268</sup> Additionally, rivals that engage in an arms race—Saudi Arabia and Iran in this chapter—resort to covert arming of strategic weapons when they cannot openly observe the other's procurement activity.<sup>269</sup> Iran's nuclear program and Saudi Arabia's quasi-secret ballistic missile program fit these findings and point towards heightened conflict in the future.

Saudi's privileged status as the world's only significant oil swing producer will likely be boosted because of the Russia-Ukraine war, and higher oil prices will almost certainly aid Riyadh's ability to prop up its allies against Iran through financial support. Tehran will likely prioritize its relationship with Russia and China while also seeking sanctions relief to capitalize on the energy-price windfall. The regimes within these energy-exporting states will continue their petrochemical competition amid international pressure to reduce carbon emissions and to diversify the energy mix. With peak-oil demand likely still almost a decade away, the crown prince and supreme leader will likely approach Chinese counterparts to compete for energy investments.<sup>270</sup> Concurrently, Tehran and Riyadh may also compete for security guarantees and weapons from either Russia (pending the outcome of the war) or China in the wake of perceived

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<sup>268</sup> Andrew J. Coe and Jane Vaynman, "Why Arms Control is so Rare," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020): 342.

<sup>269</sup> Coe and Vaynman, "Why Arms Control is so Rare," 342.

<sup>270</sup> Alex Lawler, "OPEC Forecasts Oil Demand Rebound Before Post-2035 Plateau," *Reuters*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/opec-sees-oil-demand-rebounding-then-plateauing-after-2035-2021-09-28/>.

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U.S. withdrawal from the region. Saudi and Iranian courting of these international powers not only threatens U.S. interests in the MENA region, but also foments new attack vectors for the Saudi or Iranian regimes to use against one another.

### **Competition for Leadership of the Islamic World**

Saudi Arabia's and Iran's greatest weapon against each other is their public narrative that their respective model of Islamic governance resembles true Islam. It follows that any other form of Islamic governance is therefore antithetical to their own and must be resisted inside and outside their borders. Due to this premise, the Saudi and Iranian regimes orchestrate ever-escalating means to wholly delegitimize the other in the region and at home, creating a win-lose conflict paradigm. This phenomenon is best seen on the battlefields of weak states, as annotated by Gause, Kaddorah, and Syahmanssuri in the literature review. Syahmanssuri captured a deeper piece of this issue when he explained how Iran's exportation of anti-monarchical revolutionary movements, and Saudi Arabia's proselytization in pursuit of co-religionists, provide opportunities for the rulers to promote their own legitimacy among influential religious leaders around the world.<sup>271</sup>

To ensure regime security, regional dominance, and religious leadership, the ruling elite must perpetually delegitimize the other's Islamic governing model and expand their own model. Several key events beginning with the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran through the present day deepened these models and piled on perceived evidence for why the other is an infidel. To understand how these governing models are structured today and what methods are used to delegitimize the other in this cold war, this section will first (1) provide examples of delegitimization tactics employed throughout key historical confrontations, and second (2) explain why these antithetical models must be maintained to ensure regime security and influence.

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<sup>271</sup> Syahmanssuri, "A Rivalry of Necessity," 186.

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*Delegitimization Over Decades*

The collective memory of the Iranian and Saudi elite drives the respective regimes' foreign and domestic policy goals and shapes the trajectory of this rivalry. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his trusted advisors are products of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution and propagate Khomeini's "Islam first" vision at the expense of the Iranian people. The Saudi royal family, including King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, witnessed the revolution, the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca that same year, and the Arab Spring's success in overthrowing several authoritarian regimes. The United States' twenty-year security presence in the region and Israel's exponential rise as the region's uncontested military power also factor into Iranian and Saudi foreign policy decisions. Without delving into the detailed history of the events described above, a brief overview of how these events structured the regimes' perceptions of the "other" is necessary to understand the present irreconcilable models of Islamic governance. Several components of Cohen and Hitman's recent study (2021) on what they termed the *civilio-theo-zation* of the Saudi-Iran rivalry are featured here, as well as perspectives from Saudi and Iranian scholars among others.<sup>272</sup>

*1979: Khomeini's Revolutionary Vision and the Seizure of the Grand Mosque*

Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution in 1979 and the Sunni extremists' seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, while not directly connected to one another, did both succeed in reversing decades of secular governance in Iran and reigniting strict Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. In both cases, the countries instituted or reverted to ideologies that intentionally and diametrically opposed the other, while both sought to reinvigorate support for sympathetic parties abroad. Over four decades later, the Iranian Islamic model has adapted to meet the Middle East's rapidly changing environment but largely remains unchanged in its objective to "[create] a revolutionary movement across the region to defend Shia interests."<sup>273</sup> Saudi Arabia's strategy for decades has

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<sup>272</sup> Ronan A. Cohen and Gadi Hitman, "Iran and Saudi Arabia *Civilio-Theo-Zation* Clash: Reformulating Regional Strategies Following the Arab Spring," *Trames* 25, no. 2 (2021): 258.

<sup>273</sup> Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 81.

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largely been damage control, dousing the Shia revolutionary flame by relying heavily on its wealth and promotion of its unique brand of Sunni Islam to meet Iran's competing claims of religious leadership credentials.

The leaders of today's Islamic Republic grew up in the Khomeini era indoctrinated with a vision of a militant, Shia Islamism enveloping a Middle East without geographic borders.<sup>274</sup> The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—Khomeini's chief institution tasked with exporting the revolution—leads out in this vision and functionally secures the supreme leader's control over Iran, its people, and all Shiites that adhere to Khomeini's clever principle of *Velayat-e-faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist).<sup>275</sup> According to scholars Saeud Golkar and Kasra Aarabi, *Velayat-e faqih* "provide[s] a divine mandate for a supreme clerical leader to rule over all Muslims worldwide as the Hidden Imam's deputy and God's representative on Earth."<sup>276</sup> The implication is that the supreme leader functions as the religious leader of all Muslims (though only Shiites would probably adhere to such a claim), and that there are no limits to Shia expansion in preparation for the Hidden Imam to rule the *umma*.<sup>277</sup> With remarkable success, the IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF) leads a united front of approximately 200,000 trained and armed Shia youths from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen known today in some quarters as the Shia Liberation Army (SLA), who all defend Khamenei's regime under this guiding principle.<sup>278</sup>

Saudi Arabia combatted the Islamic ideologies of Khomeini's revolution and the seizure of the Grand Mosque with its own type of proxy: money. By investing billions of petrodollars into charities, mosques, and educational institutions, the kingdom pushed its own equally

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<sup>274</sup> Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 1.

<sup>275</sup> Shiites are the second-largest branch of Islam, after Sunnis. A Shiite believes that Mohammed's son-in-law, Ali, was his legitimate successor as political and religious leader. Though Shiites hold this basic belief in common, there are further divisions within Shia Islam, another name for the group of Shiites. You can also call a Shiite a Shia, which is its root as well — from the Arabic *shi'ah*, "partisans or followers."

<sup>276</sup> Saeud Golkar and Kasra Aarabi, "The View From Tehran: Iran's Militia Doctrine," *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, February 2021, 12.

<sup>277</sup> Golkar and Aarabi, "The View From Tehran," 12.

<sup>278</sup> Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, xiv.

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extreme ideology into the minds of Muslims worldwide.<sup>279</sup> The connections between Saudi-backed institutions like the World Muslim League and the Islamic University of Medina provide connections to a wide array of religious scholars and, when coupled with Saudi Arabia's religious credentials as Custodian of Islam's two holiest mosques, act (and continue to act) as proxy efforts operating in opposition to Shia revolutionary ideology.

Saudi Arabia's crown prince was not alive for Khomeini's revolution or the attack on the Grand Mosque, but he preserves the common narrative that Iran was responsible for Sunni extremists attempting to "copy" the revolution in Mecca. He also attributes the kingdom's conservative laws regarding the guardianship of women as a reaction to the 1979 revolution and seizure in Mecca.<sup>280</sup> More on MbS' perspectives related to the regional power competition will be discussed at a later point.

*The Iran-Iraq War: Post Traumatic Stress*

Arguably no other event in history caused more paranoia and change in post-revolutionary Iran's foreign policy than the Iran-Iraq war. During the war, the only Arab states to side with Iran were Syria and Libya, with China and North Korea indirectly supporting Iran by providing military equipment.<sup>281</sup> Saddam Hussein's invasion, his use of chemical weapons and ballistic missiles, and Israel's invasion of Lebanon were—in the Iranian elite's view—backed by the United States, Europe, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and served as the bedrock for Iran's revolutionary foreign policy in opposition to the West and its allies.<sup>282</sup> These events triggered Iran's forward defense policy, as Iran realized it could not rely on traditional

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<sup>279</sup> Ali Ansari and Kasra Aarabi, "Ideology and Iran's Revolution: How 1979 Changed the World," *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, February 11, 2019, 19-20, <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/articles/Ideology-and-Iran-s-Revolution-How-1979-Changed-the-World.pdf>.

<sup>280</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'," *Atlantic*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>.

<sup>281</sup> Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Mohammad Reza Chitsazian, "Iran's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: A Grand Strategy," *Middle East Policy* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 101.

<sup>282</sup> Mousavian and Chitsazian, "Iran's Foreign Policy in the Middle East," 100-102.

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alliances with nation-states and must instead establish a web of non-state actors that, in theory, could prevent another direct conflict or invasion.<sup>283</sup>

More importantly, the Iran-Iraq War became “pivotal in operationalising an ideology that had so far been abstract” for Iran according to Dr. Ali Ansari and Kasra Aarabi at the Tony Blair Institute.<sup>284</sup> The revolutionary elite put their increasingly hard-liner ideologies to the test in Iraq and Lebanon throughout the 1980s that would serve as the baseline for proxy wars for decades to come. In the Iranian view, resisting Saddam’s offensive equated to also resisting the United States and the GCC states supporting him. In Lebanon, the Iranian regime stood up its most successful proxy to date, Hizballah, to combat the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982. Thus, Khomeini had an opportunity to unite his revolutionary Shia militants under anti-Western ideology and indirectly impose costs on the “Great Satan” (the United States and its allies) and “cancerous tumor” Israel.<sup>285</sup>

*U.S. Invasion of Iraq*

Saddam Hussein’s demise gifted the Iranian regime an opportunity to tip the balance of power in the region using sectarian, or ethnic-religious ties. While the roots of sectarian tension in Iraq existed in the Iran-Iraq war, Iran had an opportunity to exploit those tensions now that the Sunni dictator and his government were conveniently removed from power. Shia militia groups formed during the Iran-Iraq War, such as the Badr Brigade (renamed the Badr Organization), joined the Federal Police of the Ministry of the Interior, which was controlled by the Iran-based Islamic party the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The seasoned fighters “formed paramilitary units within the Ministry, which were later accused of acting as

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<sup>283</sup> Abdulmajeed Saud Manqarah, “Competing Models in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran,” *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies*, July 22, 2019, 11, 14.

<sup>284</sup> Ansari and Aarabi, “Ideology and Iran’s Revolution,” 20.

<sup>285</sup> Ansari and Aarabi, “Ideology and Iran’s Revolution,” 20.

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death squads at the height of the Shia-Sunni sectarian conflicts during the occupation years” according to Nader Uskowi, author of *Temperature Rising*.<sup>286</sup>

One Iranian scholar professed that Iran’s intentions in Iraq were simply to “write a new constitution in which there would be power sharing and the majority Shiites would have a prominent role for the first time since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire,” but that the United States’ unwillingness to collaborate with Shia militia groups forced Iran to “take a different path.”<sup>287</sup> That “new constitution” and “different path” meant an effort to install an Iran-backed puppet regime and creating chaos to prevent U.S. coalition forces from establishing a democratic government. A democratic Iraq—home to Shia Islam’s holiest mosques and a predominantly Shia population— would devastate Khamenei’s credibility and run contrary to the Islamic Republic’s Islamic governance model.<sup>288</sup>

Though without an institution like the IRGC, the Saudis continued to combat Iran’s ploy for Shia empowerment in Iraq by funding mosques, charities, and volunteer networks that fed the Sunni insurgence, and by aligning itself with Shiite groups that did not subscribe to *Velayat-e faqih*.<sup>289</sup> The money pushed to these institutions probably encouraged Sunni extremist organizations such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq, aiding the Iranian narrative that the kingdom funds terrorism.<sup>290</sup> Interestingly, the Saudi perspective shifts accountability for Sunni terrorist organizations to Iran’s governing model. A Riyadh-based think tank wrote:

The Iranian model creates a chaotic structure for the regional order, which allows for the flourishing and expansion of Sunni jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, which consolidate their presence through alliances with local groups that are threatened by the Iranian alliance. This result is based on the model that Iran adopts, for it is a model that provides a polarization that Iran-backed groups need for their own power. The international community, and the United States in particular, have prioritized combating

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<sup>286</sup> Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 100-101.

<sup>287</sup> Mousavian and Chitsazian, “Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East,” 105.

<sup>288</sup> Golkar and Aarabi, “The View From Tehran,” 34.

<sup>289</sup> Cohen and Hitman, “Iran and Saudi Arabia *Civilio-Theo-Zation* Clash,” 264; Manqarah, “Competing Models in the Middle East,” 8.

<sup>290</sup> Cohen and Hitman, “Iran and Saudi Arabia *Civilio-Theo-Zation* Clash,” 264.

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Sunni nonstate actors while neglecting their counterparts that are affiliated with Iran, which has increased Iran's chances of shaping the regional order.<sup>291</sup>

In other words, the Saudi perspective holds that Iran's proxies created a dangerous environment that fostered Arab Sunni radicalism, and that Iran's proxies fomented this polarization to maintain influence in weak states. Other Saudi scholars make the same claim, identifying a common defense likely originating from the Saudi elite to deflect responsibility for funding Sunni extremism and instead point the finger at Iran.<sup>292</sup> That is not to say there is not some evidence to point in that direction, inasmuch as the 1920 Revolution Brigades and other ex-Baathist rejectionists joined the Al Qa'ida takeover of Mosul and the Middle Euphrates River Valley in the mid-2010s specifically because they felt excluded and marginalized by Iranian-backed Shia political elites. It is simply to note that Saudi affiliates have leaned on this narrative to explain all competition with Iran throughout the region indiscriminately.

*The Arab Spring: A New Playground*

The Arab Spring presented the ultimate environment to test Saudi and Iranian competing governing models, with Iran finishing in first place. The overthrow of authoritarian regimes across many parts of the region provided Iran, once again, an opportunity to export Khomeini's vision by employing sectarian narratives as well as anti-monarchical rhetoric that resonated with the movement. For its part, the Saudi autocracy witnessed its greatest fears coming to fruition and sought to prop up the Arab regimes or re-install them, to prevent Iranian expansion.

Saudi rhetoric surrounding the Arab uprisings is one of defense, pointing to the instability of weak states as a byproduct of the aggressive Iranian model. Riyadh-based scholars Abdullah K. Al-Saud and Joseph A. Kéchichian wrote:

The most detrimental consequence of the Arab uprisings, however, was the weakening and failure of state institutions and the ensuing challenges to the very sovereignty and territorial integrity of many afflicted states. This has contributed to an ongoing structural shift in regional geopolitics and power balance. Traditional centres of power in the Arab world such as Egypt and Iraq have been weakened and, in the midst of this volatile

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<sup>291</sup> Manqarah, "Competing Models in the Middle East," 15.

<sup>292</sup> Abdullah K. Al-Saud and Joseph A. Kéchichian, "The Evolving Security Landscape Around the Arabian Peninsula: A Saudi Perspective," *Istituto Affari Internazionali* 20, no. 15 (2020): 12.

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regional environment and the ensuing vacuum, the Gulf, and in particular Saudi Arabia, emerged as the new centre of gravity.<sup>293</sup>

Al-Saud and Kéchichian go on to say that Saudi Arabia's concern with Iran is not Saudi fears of domestic stability or security, but rather that "[Iran's] actions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere, all highlighted Iranian hegemonic aspirations that exploited chaos and skirted good neighbourly relations."<sup>294</sup> Hidden in this message, but hinted at, is the opportunity the uprisings presented the Saudi autocracy to emerge as the region's hegemon in something other than oil. The uprisings may have initiated fears of revolution within its own country, but the instability in states like Egypt, for example, elevated Saudi Arabia's leadership potential abroad and opened opportunities to rebuild weak states into strong nation-states created in Saudi's image.

Of key importance today and after over a decade of civil war, Syria and Yemen remain the two holdouts in this battle for influence. Syria—or perhaps more accurately, the Assad regime—remains Tehran's most important ally in the region, and much Shia blood has been spilt to keep Assad's family in power. The supreme leader and IRGC claimed to be defending the Sayyidah Zaynab Mosque early in the war, the shrine devoted to the daughter of Ali that bears a strong resonance for Arab Gulf Shia in particular. The Assad regime recruited numerous Gulf Arab Shia to journey to Syria to defend the mosque, though no fighting occurred anywhere near the mosque and no evidence exists that the shrine was ever threatened. Iran justified sending its fighters to Syria to defend the shrine from Sunni opposition—a claim that some scholars cite as a religious-sectarian motive.<sup>295</sup> However, this claim by the Iranian regime likely had less to do with a sectarian motive and more to do with unifying Shia militia groups under a common ideology to preserve the Assad regime in the collapsing country. Iranian officials' motives in

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<sup>293</sup> Al-Saud and Kéchichian, "The Evolving Security Landscape Around the Arabian Peninsula," 10.

<sup>294</sup> Al-Saud and Kéchichian, "The Evolving Security Landscape Around the Arabian Peninsula," 11-12.

<sup>295</sup> Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 80-81.

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Syria may not be sectarian- or ethnic-based at all. Tehran's primary goal is to keep the Assad regime in power, fearing that a less-friendly replacement would disrupt Iranian interests.<sup>296</sup>

In Yemen, the Saudi royal family stands to lose the confidence of Saudi citizens and Arab allies if it cannot keep Iran's proxies out of its backyard. Conversely, the Iranian regime stands to control part of the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint, proximity to Saudi Arabia's southern border, and add one more country to its web of influence through its support to the Houthis in northern Yemen. Houthi leadership's revolutionary ideology traces back to the early years of Iran's revolution, at a time when many northern Yemenis of the Zaydi Shia faith felt marginalized and dispossessed by the military-led Republican government in Sana'a. Of Housein al-Houthi and his brother Abdulmalek, Uskowi wrote, "After their stay in revolutionary Iran, they brought home a militant interpretation of Shia Islam. An attack in 1990 by militant Sunnis, reportedly under Salafi influence, against a Zaydi mosque in the Houthis' stronghold of Saada ..., made the Houthis more radical and sectarian."<sup>297</sup>

Uncomfortable with the proximity of radical Shia militants, Saudi-led coalition members blocked IRGC-QF access to Yemeni ports and airspace, contracted ground forces such as the anti-Houthi tribes and the Sudanese, and continued indiscriminate bombing campaigns over Yemen.<sup>298</sup> The violence in Yemen, which Human Rights Watch reported has killed over 17,500 Yemeni civilians since 2015, damages MbS' self-purported claims of liberal reform and moderate Islam.<sup>299</sup> Prominent Sunni clerics such as Libya's Grand Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani or

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<sup>296</sup> Jennifer Khavanagh et al., *Anticipating Adversary Military Interventions* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), 84.

<sup>297</sup> Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 117.

<sup>298</sup> Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 122.

<sup>299</sup> "World Report 2020: Yemen," Human Rights Watch, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/yemen>.

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Qatar-based Sunni cleric Yusef al-Qaradawi boycotted the Hajj, accusing MbS and the royal family of using funds from the pilgrimage to "carry out crimes against our fellow Muslims."<sup>300</sup>

*MbS: Same Objective, Different Means*

MbS may be a generation removed from the 1979 revolution and its immediate effects, but he arguably cares deeply—if not more—about regime security, than his predecessors that experienced Khomeini’s revolution. In addition to eradicating corruption among the Saudi political and clerical elite at home, MbS has sought to forcefully deflect Iranian aggression and influence abroad.<sup>301</sup> The crown prince continues to lead operations in Yemen and led the nearly four-year blockade on Qatar, nominally for its associations with Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood (discussed in more detail in chapter four). A possible, and even likely, step MbS may take to deter Iranian influence would be normalizing relations with Israel. However, while normalizing ties likely makes sense to MbS from an economic and national security perspective, he understands that such a decision reverses the long-held conservative policies of his father and threatens his religious standing domestically.<sup>302</sup> Upon the death of his father, MbS must weigh which outcome he fears more: the backlash from the conservative Arab population for normalizing ties with the Jewish state, or the opportunity costs in ignoring the region’s most militarily and technologically superior country with capabilities to deter Iran.

What makes the crown prince truly different than his predecessors in relation to the Iranian-Saudi conflict is his “Saudi first” approach. MbS made clear that, “[the government’s] project is based on the people, on economic interests, and not on expansionist ideological

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<sup>300</sup> Ahmed Twaij, “Mohammed bin Salman Is Making Muslims Boycott Mecca,” *Foreign Policy*, July 2, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/02/mohammed-bin-salman-is-making-muslims-boycott-mecca-hajj-islam-pilgrimage-saudi-arabia/>.

<sup>301</sup> Nicholas Kulish, “Ritz-Carlton Has Become a Gilded Cage for Saudi Royals,” *New York Times*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/06/world/middleeast/ritz-carlton-riyadh-saudi-princes.html>. See also Ben Hubbard, “Saudi Prince, Asserting Power, Brings Clerics to Heel,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/05/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-wahhabism-salafism-mohammed-bin-salman.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer>.

<sup>302</sup> John Haltiwanger, “Saudi Leader MBS Seemingly Open to Discussing Normalizing Relations with Israel, but has Conditions: Report,” *Business Insider*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/biden-national-security-advisor-discussed-saudi-israel-normalization-with-mbs-2021-10>.

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interests.”<sup>303</sup> Contrarily, MbS also felt the need to justify Riyadh’s expansionist ideological interests:

Absolute monarchy is not a threat to any country. ... Okay, each country, each regime, it has to do what the people think is workable. Saudi Arabia is a network of thousands of absolute monarchies, and then has a large absolute monarchy. We have tribal monarchies, town monarchies. Moving against this structure would create huge problems in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi fabric is much more complicated than you think. And actually our king doesn’t have absolute power. His power is based in law. If he is making a royal decree, he can’t say, “I’m King Salman and I’m doing this.” If you read decrees, you first see the list of laws that allow the king to take this decision.<sup>304</sup>

What MbS fails to mention in this statement is that the clerics who interpret *Sharia* law are installed and removed at his discretion.

No matter the purported reasons for his interest in expanding Saudi influence, MbS did not mince words when asked about his opinions towards the Iranian regime. Early on in his appointment as crown prince, he described his views on the Iranian regime to Jeffrey Goldberg, editor-in-chief of *The Atlantic*: “I believe the Iranian supreme leader makes Hitler look good. Hitler didn’t do what the supreme leader is trying to do. Hitler tried to conquer Europe. ... The supreme leader is trying to conquer the world.”<sup>305</sup> In the same interview, MbS rejected the idea that hard-line Wahhabism is a religious ideology, and minimized Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s influence on the House of Saud by claiming he was one tribal leader among many that the royal family allied with 600 years ago to build the Saudi state.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Goldberg, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good’,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>.

<sup>304</sup> Goldberg, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good’,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>.

<sup>305</sup> Goldberg, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good’,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>.

<sup>306</sup> Goldberg, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good’,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>.

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*Existential Need to Delegitimize the Other*

Two fundamental drivers lie at the root of these regimes' existential need to delegitimize the other's Islamic governing model. First, the Iranian model's success lies in its ability to unite Shia militant groups and insurgencies under a common revolutionary ideology (*Velayat-e faqih*), granting the revolutionary movement its unity of effort abroad and absolute control at home. Iran's opposition to the Saudi nation-state model must be maintained for this ideology to propagate and strengthen the regime. The second driver mirrors the first but in reverse. Without a pan-Arab ideology to unite nation-states in opposition to Iran, the kingdom is losing the regional war of influence and fears insurgency at home. The Saudi elite relies on their wealth, diplomatic ties, and exclusivist Wahhabi brand to pressure weak states into resisting Iranian expansion and incentivize Saudi citizens not to rebel. In short, the Iranian theocracy needs a Middle East composed of weak states to assuage fears of strong, Sunni Arab states that could overpower it.<sup>307</sup> The Saudi autocracy needs a Middle East composed of strong, Sunni nation-states that recognize Saudi regional and religious hegemony to, in theory, legitimize its regime and protect it from Iranian aggression.

*Iran: Strength Abroad, Weak at Home*

The many historical examples above demonstrate Iran's resilience in the face of international and regional opposition to its militant Shiite ideology and theocratic regime. Paradoxically, sanctions significantly devastate Iran's economic health but at the expense of the Iranian people, and some argue they have made the IRGC's smuggling operations far more lucrative.<sup>308</sup> Sanctions also gave credibility—in Khamenei's and the IRGC's view—to their claim that America and the West are the sources of Iranian and all Muslim suffering. Khomeini's dream of destroying Israel and ridding the Middle East of America's influence is yet to be

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<sup>307</sup> Khavanagh et al., *Anticipating Adversary Military Interventions*, 83.

<sup>308</sup> Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, "Tougher U.S. Sanctions Will Enrich Iran's Revolutionary Guards," *Foreign Policy*, October 4, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/04/irans-revolutionary-guard-corps-wont-suffer-from-stronger-u-s-sanctions-theyll-benefit-irgc-trump-sanctions/>.

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realized, but Tehran's patience and ideological consistency have paid great dividends in both goals.

Meanwhile, the regime's paranoia of external forces teaming up to destroy Iran has created perhaps an even greater threat: Iranian nationalists. Carnegie Senior Fellow Karim Sadjadpour quipped, "Like a bodybuilder with failing organs, ... Iran displays external vigor that conceals ultimately incurable internal maladies."<sup>309</sup> This nationalism was manifest in surprising and unpredictable ways during the Green Movement protests following the 2009 presidential election and the videos that surfaced of Iranians praising the former monarchical regime of the Shah. Iran prioritizes its revolutionary objectives above all else, including the needs of its citizens despite its extremely limited political and economic liquidity. Sadjadpour summed up the Iranian nationalist threat this way:

Where the Iranian regime's grand strategy threatens its own survival is on the home front. As Iran's economy has deteriorated, Iranians have naturally come to question the government's policies, including its hostility toward the United States and its external adventurism. ... Yet there are often two prerequisites for the collapse of an authoritarian regime: pressure from below and divisions at the top. Although Iran is experiencing increasing popular tumult, for now the regime's security forces appear—from afar, at least—to be united and willing to kill, while the country's discontented masses are divided and leaderless.<sup>310</sup>

Khamenei chooses to ignore his people and further repress them while he stands behind a ruthless, ideologically synchronized fighting force that enjoys freedom of movement inside and outside the country.

The supreme leader's justification for delegitimizing Saudi Arabia's nation-state model then becomes clear: the model threatens his regime not just externally, but inside his borders. The continuity of Khomeini's Islamic governing model must be preserved by Khamenei's successor for Iran's regional ambitions to survive. The supreme leader likely understands this, and it is projected that either Khamenei's son Mojtaba Khamenei or Iranian president Ebrahim

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<sup>309</sup> Karim Sadjadpour, "Iran's Hollow Victory," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2022-02-16/irans-hollow-victory>.

<sup>310</sup> Sadjadpour, "Iran's Hollow Victory," <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2022-02-16/irans-hollow-victory>.

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Raisi would succeed him to provide that ideological continuity.<sup>311</sup> Given the supreme leader's age (82 at the time of writing), lack of clear successor, growing public discontent and criticism of the regime, and ever-increasing economic turmoil, there is a real possibility that the next political transition could result unintentionally in the overthrow of the regime or even an accompanying civil war sometime in the next decade.

*Saudi Arabia: Weak abroad, Strong at Home*

Riyadh's general strategy for decades in combatting Iranian aggression has been to strengthen local groups that resist the doctrine of *Velayat-e faqih*, organizing a regional bloc of stable countries to impose costs on Iran's expansion activities, and ultimately relying on the international community to oversee these local and regional objectives.<sup>312</sup> Saudi scholar Abdulmajeed Saud Manqarah proposes that Saudi Arabia is best equipped to fill the role of "regional counterweight," citing Turkey's inability to confront Iran due to the "Kurdish question" and Israel's inability to network with local groups in the region.<sup>313</sup> Yet, the kingdom suffers from its own struggles to unify resistance groups and allied Arab states due to ideological differences and differing end-state goals.

The Saudis have lacked unity of effort among their regional partners from the beginning of the Iranian Revolution on through today's conflicts in Syria and Yemen. In the wake of 1979, Saudi Arabia backed Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran but found itself in Iraq's crosshairs only a decade later after Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990.<sup>314</sup> In Syria, the Sunni Arab resistance struggled, and continues to struggle, with mixed Islamist and nationalist ideologies, causing rebel infighting and fractures.<sup>315</sup> Politically, the Saudi-backed Higher Negotiations Committee

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<sup>311</sup> Rana Rahimpour, "Iran's Supreme Leader: Who might succeed Ali Khamenei?," *BBC News*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55257059>.

<sup>312</sup> Manqarah, "Competing Models in the Middle East," 16.

<sup>313</sup> Manqarah, "Competing Models in the Middle East," 16.

<sup>314</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Gulf War, 1991," Office of the Historian, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/gulf-war>.

<sup>315</sup> Anne Barnard, Mohammad Ghannam, and Hqaida Saad, "Disillusionment Grows Among Syrian Opposition as Fighting Drags On," *New York Times*, November 28, 2013,

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attempted to unify Syrian political groups in opposition to the Assad regime but failed to present a viable transition plan that everyone could agree on.<sup>316</sup> In Yemen, Saudi has risked losing its two most military-capable allies, the United States and the UAE, due to disagreements over the overall mission objectives and international media pressure.<sup>317</sup> The latter temporarily backed out after being unable to reconcile UAE-Saudi differences on which groups to back and Emirati fears that an escalation in the conflict likely would lead to a direct military confrontation with Iran.<sup>318</sup> These vulnerabilities (reliance on more militarily-capable regional and international allies, lack of long-term diplomatic strategy, etc.) leave the kingdom with little choice than to challenge the Iranian model on ideological and religious grounds. Riyadh must delegitimize the Shia revolutionary ideology from the bottom-up to disband Iranian unity of effort and sever the Shia militias' ties to the C2 structure—the Iranian regime. One long-standing effort to delegitimize the Shia revolutionary ideology in Wahhabi circles is the trend of promoting the Salafist doctrine of *takfirism*.

### Takfirism

Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia religiously delegitimized the Iranian regime using *takfiri* (exclusivist) rhetoric to combat Shia teachings and repress its Shia minority within its own borders.<sup>319</sup> Drs. Jawed Syed and Edwina Pio define a *takfiri* as “an extremist

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/29/world/middleeast/syria-war.html>; Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “Rebel Infighting Escalates in Northwest Syria,” *Reuters*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels/rebel-infighting-escalates-in-northwest-syria-idUSKCN1OX1JF>.

<sup>316</sup> Amr Alsarraj and Philip Hoffman, “The Syrian Political Opposition’s Path to Irrelevance,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, May 15, 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/05/15/syrian-political-opposition-s-path-to-irrelevance-pub-81799>.

<sup>317</sup> Joseph Stepansky, “US Ending Aid to Saudi-led Forces in Yemen, but Questions Persist,” *Al-Jazeera*, February 7, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/7/us-ending-support-to-saudi-led-war-in-yemen-questions-persist>.

<sup>318</sup> Thomas Juneau, “The UAE and the War in Yemen: From Surge to Recalibration,” *Survival* 62, no. 4 (September 2020): 198-199.

<sup>319</sup> Jawed Syed and Faiza Ali, “A Pyramid of Hate Perspective on Religious Bias, Discrimination, and Violence,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 172 (2021): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04505-5>. See also Human Rights Watch, “‘They are Not Our Brothers’: Hate Speech by Saudi Officials,” September 26, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/09/26/they-are-not-our-brothers/hate-speech-saudi-officials>.

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Muslim who accuses other Muslim individuals, groups, or entire societies as *kufir* (infidelity, heresy, blasphemy) due to political, ideological, or sectarian differences, and resorts to violence against non-Muslims and other non-*takfiri* Muslims to enforce a *takfiri* agenda.”<sup>320</sup> Nearly all Islamist terrorist organizations (such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabab, Boko Haram, and the Taliban) identify with Salafi, Wahhabi, or Deobandi ideology, though Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Islamic Affairs denies all such direct connections between Saudi state-sponsored religious tenets and foreign terrorist groups.<sup>321</sup>

As it relates to the persecution of Shiites, *takfiri* militants in the kingdom and abroad view all Shias as Iranian or Iran’s proxies, and are “seen as aggressive, abusive, threatening and supportive of violence and terrorism.”<sup>322</sup> While scholars estimate that only a fraction (5 percent of the global Muslim population) of Sunnis could be identified as *takfiri*, the conservative Salafi/Wahhabi communities find refuge under the broader Sunni umbrella and claim to represent the views of all Sunni Muslims.<sup>323</sup>

Members of the Iranian elite paint all Sunni terrorists as *takfiri* and implicate Saudi Arabia for spawning these extremists. *Takfiri* adherents do not exist as a monolithic entity any more than all Sunnis or Shiites are the same, yet “Iranian discourse often paints Wahhabism, Salafism, and other conservative Sunni movements with the same *takfiri* brush.”<sup>324</sup> Iranian-

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<sup>320</sup> Jawad Syed and Edwina Pio, “Unsophisticated and Naïve? Fragmenting Monolithic Understandings of Islam,” *Journal of Management & Organization* 24, no. 5 (2018): 601.

<sup>321</sup> Syed and Pio, “Unsophisticated and Naïve?,” 600; Yasmine Farouk and Nathan J. Brown, “Saudi Arabia’s Religious Reforms are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 7, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/saudi-arabia-s-religious-reforms-are-touching-nothing-but-changing-everything-pub-84650>.

<sup>322</sup> Syed and Ali, “A Pyramid of Hate Perspective on Religious Bias, Discrimination, and Violence,” 45. Other scholars have noted that “there is a widespread sense in the Arab world that Arab culture is somehow ‘inherently’ Sunni ...” and that “Shi’a are by definition schematics who have willingly taken themselves out of the Arab fold by espousing Shi’ism, perhaps even with some Persian connivance.” See Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi’a: The Forgotten Muslims*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 34.

<sup>323</sup> Syed and Pio, “Unsophisticated and Naïve?,” 601; Max Fisher, “How Saudi Arabia Captured Washington,” *Vox*, March 21, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/21/11275354/saudi-arabia-gulf-washington>.

<sup>324</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, “Takfiris in Tehran: The Sectarian Face of Iranian Counterterrorism,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 24, 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/takfiris-tehran-sectarian-face-iranian-counterterrorism>.

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American scholar and former Shia cleric Mehdi Khalaji described Iran's strategic redirect of the Salafist doctrine of *takfirism* and its utility in delegitimizing the Saudi regime this way:

...“takfiri” is nevertheless a loaded word capable of mobilizing the Shiite masses against Salafists and Wahhabis by highlighting the sectarian elements of their identity and appealing to primordial religious sentiments. It also allows the regime to equate the most violent Salafist groups with Wahhabism in general, and therefore with Saudi Arabia, the birthplace and foremost exporter of that brand of Islam. Indeed, Tehran constantly depicts the Saudi government as the main supporter and funder of violent Islamist entities, especially IS. This takfiri approach to anti-Saudi propaganda allows the regime to portray its tensions with Riyadh less as a political/economic rivalry between two countries than as a deeper conflict based on perennial sectarian differences.<sup>325</sup>

In addition to fending off ISIS in Iraq and at its own borders, Iran's fears of *takfiri* expansion renewed following the Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan after U.S. withdrawal from the country. The Taliban historically oppressed Shiite Muslims, and recent Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) bombings of Shiite mosques in Afghanistan and Pakistan point to future sectarian conflict despite improving Taliban-Shiite relations.<sup>326</sup>

Despite MbS' efforts to relax the kingdom's strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and to consolidate power over the sprawling Saudi religious apparatus, liberal reforms in the kingdom are unlikely to quell extremist or *takfiri* teachings completely.<sup>327</sup> In addition to allowing women to drive, rewriting discriminatory history books, and stripping the religious police of arrest authority, the crown prince is unilaterally sidelining the conservative Wahhabi clerical

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<sup>325</sup> Khalaji, “Takfiris in Tehran,” <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/takfiris-tehran-sectarian-face-iranian-counterterrorism>.

<sup>326</sup> Ismail Khan and Salman Masood, “ISIS Claims Bombing of Pakistani Mosque, Killing Dozens,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/world/middleeast/pakistan-peshawar-mosque-explosion.html>; Vali Nasr, “All Against All: The Sectarian Resurgence in the Post-American Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-12-02/iran-middle-east-all-against-all>.

<sup>327</sup> Martin Chulov, “I will Return Saudi Arabia to Moderate Islam, Says Crown Prince,” *Guardian*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>; David Ottaway, “Saudi Crown Prince Lambasts His Kingdom's Wahhabi Establishment,” *Wilson Center*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/saudi-crown-prince-lambasts-his-kingdoms-wahhabi-establishment>.

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establishment.<sup>328</sup> While some clerics, such as Sheikh Mohammed Al-Issa (Secretary General of the Muslim World League) conform with official Saudi government rhetoric to maintain their privileged status, others are outwardly defying the monarchy and paying the price through their arrest.<sup>329</sup> The widening gap between the conservative clerics and the royal family, in conjunction with the ongoing proxy wars with Iran, is likely to perpetuate violence within and without the kingdom.

However, MbS does not seem to think that he or the kingdom has had negative views of Shiites. In April 2018, the crown prince said, “the Shiites are living normally in Saudi Arabia. We have no problem with the Shiites. We have a problem with the ideology of the Iranian regime.”<sup>330</sup> To some degree this statement appears true given that MbS appointed Saudi Arabia’s first Shia cabinet member and selected a few elite Shia businessmen to sit on the boards of the prince’s Neom super-city and national football team.<sup>331</sup> But, Shiite mosques are still restricted to the Eastern Province, freedom to practice Shiism’s sacred Ashura ritual is limited, and the highest religious or judicial courts lack Shia representation.<sup>332</sup> Couple these facts with the killing of prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr in 2016 for organizing protests in the Eastern Province, it

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<sup>328</sup> Sarah Dadouch, “Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Seeks to Reduce Influential Clerics’ Power,” *Washington Post*, August 3, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/saudi-clerics-crown-prince-mohammed/2021/08/02/9ae796a0-e3ed-11eb-88c5-4fd6382c47cb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/saudi-clerics-crown-prince-mohammed/2021/08/02/9ae796a0-e3ed-11eb-88c5-4fd6382c47cb_story.html).

<sup>329</sup> Faisal J. Abbas, “‘West Not Plotting Against Islam,’ says MWL’s Sheikh Mohammed Al-Issa in Exclusive Interview,” *Arab News*, July 8, 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1335126/amp>; Farouk and Brown, “Saudi Arabia’s Religious Reforms are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 7, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/saudi-arabia-s-religious-reforms-are-touching-nothing-but-changing-everything-pub-84650>; Dadouch, “Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Seeks to Reduce Influential Clerics’ Power,” [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/saudi-clerics-crown-prince-mohammed/2021/08/02/9ae796a0-e3ed-11eb-88c5-4fd6382c47cb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/saudi-clerics-crown-prince-mohammed/2021/08/02/9ae796a0-e3ed-11eb-88c5-4fd6382c47cb_story.html). See also Samia Nakhoul, William Maclean, and Katie Paul, “Skirmishes Over Culture Strain Alliance Between Saudi Rulers, Clerics,” *Reuters*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-saudi-crownprince-reforms/skirmishes-over-culture-strain-alliance-between-saudi-rulers-clerics-idUSKBN1871NI>.

<sup>330</sup> Goldberg, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good’,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>.

<sup>331</sup> “Shias are Doing Better in Saudi Arabia,” *Economist*, August 30, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/08/30/shias-are-doing-better-in-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>332</sup> Shias are Doing Better in Saudi Arabia,” <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/08/30/shias-are-doing-better-in-saudi-arabia>.

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is difficult to know how serious MbS is in diffusing religious-sectarian differences.<sup>333</sup> The key element missing from the MbS' Vision 2030 is religious pluralism, and the true test of the prince's vision will be whether his reforms extend to the Shiites, who account for 12 percent of the overall population.<sup>334</sup> At the time of writing, there is no law that bans *takfiri* ideology or teachings.

*Takfirism: A Risky Investment*

So long as ultra-conservative clerics retain their millions of followers, and the state uses its petrodollars to fund mosques, seminaries, and media that promote Wahhabi or *takfiri* ideology, the Saudi-Iranian power competition in MENA and violence towards Shiites or non-Muslims in general are likely to continue into 2030.<sup>335</sup> Additionally, *takfirism* may put the crown prince in the crosshairs of his own people. There's a strong possibility that conservative clerics with substantial followers in Saudi Arabia could persuade the minds of adherents to *takfiri* doctrines and enemies of the royal court to turn on the crown prince in addition to the kingdom's Shia population.<sup>336</sup> External factors such as Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon or the Houthis winning the war in Yemen would further increase the likelihood of a coup, proliferate *takfiri* ideology, and challenge some of MbS' religious reforms, reminiscent of the 1960s and 1979

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<sup>333</sup> Saudi Arabia's Killing of Leading Shiite Cleric and 46 Others Sparks Outcry," *NPR*, January 2, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/01/02/461753992/saudi-arabias-killing-of-leading-shiite-cleric-and-46-others-sparks-outcry>.

<sup>334</sup> Antonella Caruso, "Saudi Arabia Still Treats Shiites as Second-Class Citizens," *Foreign Policy*, May 11, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/11/mohammed-bin-salman-mbs-saudi-arabia-still-treats-shiites-second-class-citizens/>.

<sup>335</sup> Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, "Quiet Support for Saudis Entangles U.S. in Yemen," *New York Times*, March 13, 2016, [; Syed and Ali, "A Pyramid of Hate Perspective on Religious Bias, Discrimination, and Violence," 46.](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/14/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-us.html?_r=0#_r=1&referer=)

<sup>336</sup> Farouk and Brown, "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything," <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/saudi-arabia-s-religious-reforms-are-touching-nothing-but-changing-everything-pub-84650>.

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reversions to strict Wahhabism.<sup>337</sup> Even so, *takfiri* ideology benefits the Saudi royal court in the short term, as it encourages Sunni extremists abroad who persistently threaten Shia-led governments in Iraq and Iran.

As this section and the section previous has shown, one root cause of the Saudi-Iran rivalry is ideologically-opposed Islamic governing models. *Takfirism* serves as one of the more dangerous delegitimization practices that Saudi Arabia sponsors, or at the very least, accommodates to compete with Iran's resilient militant Shia ideology. Saudi *takfirism* also paradoxically strengthens the Iranian model's effectiveness because Khomeini's expansionist doctrine appeals to persecuted or marginalized Shiites in Arab countries. Targeting these equally violent and harmful ideologies—from their conception in the minds of impressionable youth to impacting the seasoned elite policymakers of these countries—must be prioritized to make any meaningful impact on radicalism. However, as former National Security Council staffer John Hannah wrote for *Foreign Policy*, “Killing terrorists has proven a relatively straightforward task. Killing the state of mind—the idea that helps radicalize and then, in far too many instances, weaponize young Muslims to kill nonbelievers—has been a vastly more difficult undertaking.”<sup>338</sup>

### The Arms Race

The accelerating arms race between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a key element of this cold war. As the two powers more heavily invest in advanced weaponry and continue stockpiling arms, this major rivalry inches ever closer to a direct, ground war. Decades of delegitimization, extremist teachings, and proxy warfare indicate that Riyadh and Tehran almost certainly prefer to avoid direct conflict by substituting asymmetrical tactics, but neither regime is naïve enough to count out the possibility of a conventional war. The two countries have been preparing for such a hypothetical war since at least the Iranian revolution. Despite the great disparity between the two

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<sup>337</sup> Farouk and Brown, “Saudi Arabia’s Religious Reforms are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything,” <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/saudi-arabia-s-religious-reforms-are-touching-nothing-but-changing-everything-pub-84650>.

<sup>338</sup> John Hannah, “It’s Time for Saudi Arabia to Stop Exporting Extremism,” *Foreign Policy*, May 3, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/03/its-time-for-saudi-arabia-to-stop-exporting-extremism/>.

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regime's ability to purchase or otherwise procure weaponry, with Iran able to field a much larger and better trained military force and Saudi Arabia able to procure more advanced Western equipment, Saudi Arabia's and Iran's arsenals—if deployed to their fullest extent on the other—would prove catastrophic. The next section outlines the respective country's weapons capabilities and how the arms race intensifies the Saudi-Iran cold war.

*Iran's (Nuclear) Missile Program*

Tehran's ballistic missile program and aspirations to become a nuclear power to some extent deter regional foes like the Saudis and Israelis from striking the Iranian homeland on their own (i.e. without U.S. materiel support and/or political cover), and those programs also give Iran a significant offensive advantage over the Saudis. Despite the thirteen-year Iranian arms embargo (2007-2020) and international sanctions, Tehran demonstrated the program's reach in multiple missile strikes that have left several Saudi Aramco facilities temporarily inoperable, in addition to the hundreds of missile attacks launched from Yemen since 2015.<sup>339</sup> Iran's ballistic missile arsenal is the largest in the Middle East and the regime depends on the stockpile to compensate for its nearly defunct air force.<sup>340</sup> Since lifting the arms embargo, Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami announced that Iran would sell more weapons than it would buy, and that Iran could produce 90 percent of its defense needs locally.<sup>341</sup> Buyers of Iranian ballistic missiles and defense systems almost certainly include the Houthis in Yemen and the Assad regime in Syria.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> The UN arms embargo on Iran was lifted in October 2020 despite U.S. protest. The embargo forbade exports of nuclear weapon delivery systems, and most major conventional weapons to Iran. See Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "UN Arms Embargo on Iran," April 7, 2021, [https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un\\_arms\\_embargoes/iran](https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un_arms_embargoes/iran); Frank Gardner, "Middle East Risks Renewed Arms Race, US Warns," *BBC News*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53225999>.

<sup>340</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2019), 30-31.

<sup>341</sup> "Iran Will Sell More Weapons Than it Will Buy: Defense Chief," *Tehran Times*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/453711/Iran-will-sell-more-weapons-than-it-will-buy-defense-chief>.

<sup>342</sup> Kyra Rauschenbach, "Iranian Weapons Exports Have Lasting Effects on Regional Dynamics," *Critical Threats*, October 26, 2020, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iranian-weapons-exports-will-have-lasting-effects-on-regional-dynamics>.

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Saudi leadership considers Iran's ballistic missile program to be more concerning than the nuclear threat (for now).<sup>343</sup> Riyadh objected to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, largely because it dealt only with the nuclear program and excluded the more immediate threats of ballistic missile strikes and Iranian-funded proxies.<sup>344</sup> The Gulf States, and Saudi Arabia in particular, equally oppose a return to the JCPOA, likely fearing that sanctions relief will once again enable the Iranian regime to fund terror in the region and challenge Saudi hegemony, even as Iran continues to covertly pursue enrichment.<sup>345</sup>

In the meantime, Riyadh's response to Tehran's missile program and to regional instability in general has been to acquire advanced weaponry from international partners. In the years 2017-2021, the kingdom imported 11 percent of the world's global arms exports, making it the second largest arms importer in the world (second only to India).<sup>346</sup> According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 82 percent of those imports originated from the U.S. and "included 97 F-15SA combat aircraft, a type used by Saudi Arabia in the ongoing war in Yemen, and 8 Patriot air defence systems, a type used against missiles fired by Houthi rebels in Yemen."<sup>347</sup> Notably, despite the air superiority that these systems grant the Saudis, the Saudis typically retaliate against Iranian-borne strikes by bombing Yemen, not Iran. But with the increased scrutiny of these arms sales under the Biden administration, the autocracy recently

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<sup>343</sup> Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, "Gulf Arab States That Opposed the Iran Nuclear Deal are Now Courting Tehran," *Washington Post*, December 11, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/uae-saudi-iran-diplomacy-nuclear-deal/2021/12/11/8c51edae-586c-11ec-8396-5552bef55c3c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/uae-saudi-iran-diplomacy-nuclear-deal/2021/12/11/8c51edae-586c-11ec-8396-5552bef55c3c_story.html).

<sup>344</sup> DeYoung and Sly, "Gulf Arab States That Opposed the Iran Nuclear Deal are Now Courting Tehran," [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/uae-saudi-iran-diplomacy-nuclear-deal/2021/12/11/8c51edae-586c-11ec-8396-5552bef55c3c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/uae-saudi-iran-diplomacy-nuclear-deal/2021/12/11/8c51edae-586c-11ec-8396-5552bef55c3c_story.html).

<sup>345</sup> Steven A. Cook, "A New Iran Deal Means Old Chaos," *Foreign Policy*, February 17, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/17/iran-deal-jcpoa-israel-saudi-emirates-houthis/>.

<sup>346</sup> Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2021," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, March 2022, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2022/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2021>.

<sup>347</sup> Wezeman, Kuimova, Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2021," <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2022/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2021>.

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turned to China for aid in producing its own quasi-secret ballistic missile program to make a direct attack on Iran possible.<sup>348</sup>

If Riyadh responds with its own missile program that could overwhelm Iranian air defenses, Iran is likely to expand its own program, ignoring Western pressure to reduce missile production.<sup>349</sup> Abdallah Ghanem Al Kahtani, a retired Major General from the Royal Saudi Armed Forces, said of the two missile programs:

Iranian ballistic missiles can reach all parts of Saudi Arabia and beyond. ... That is why Saudi Arabia must have its own ballistic missiles that can hit any part in Iran. This is the best way to achieve equal and effective deterrence. ... But if ballistic missile attacks originate from inside Iran, the Saudi response will be in kind, and that is why Saudi Arabia is developing its ballistic missiles capability for defensive and deterrence purposes only.<sup>350</sup>

Whether the Saudi missile program will exclusively be used for defensive purposes is hard to know in this early stage, but the Iranian regime likely will feel it has no choice but to expand its ballistic missile program and seek the ultimate deterrent of a nuclear bomb to outpace the Saudis.<sup>351</sup> As Al Kahtani mentioned, a Saudi missile program would also enable direct strikes on Iranian soil, escalating the possibility of a direct war with Iran. Alternatively, the Saudis could proliferate these ballistic missiles to their own proxies in the region to impose costs on Iran in the same way that Yemen or Hizballah use Iranian missiles against the Saudis and Saudi allies. Saudi weapon proliferation wouldn't be without precedent, as investigations into Saudi and UAE

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<sup>348</sup> Warren P. Strobel, "Biden Re-Examining U.S. Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia," *Wall Street Journal*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-freezes-u-s-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia-uae-11611773191>; Jared Malsin, Summer Said, and Warren P. Strobel, "Saudis Begin Making Ballistic Missiles With Chinese Help," *Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudis-begin-making-ballistic-missiles-with-chinese-help-11640294886>.

<sup>349</sup> Sajjad Safaei and Trita Parsi, "Saudi Arabia is Ratcheting Up the Middle East's Arms Race," *Foreign Policy*, February 1, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/01/saudi-arabia-is-ratcheting-up-the-middle-east-arms-race/>.

<sup>350</sup> Riad Kahwaji, "Saudi Ballistic Missile Program Seeks Deterrence Against Iran, Houthi Strikes," *Breaking Defense*, February 4, 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/02/saudi-ballistic-missile-program-seeks-deterrence-against-iran-houthi-strikes/>.

<sup>351</sup> Safaei and Parsi, "Saudi Arabia is Ratcheting Up the Middle East's Arms Race," <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/01/saudi-arabia-is-ratcheting-up-the-middle-east-arms-race/>.

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weapons imports show that many U.S.-provided arms were re-sold or furnished to a variety of Sunni militias.<sup>352</sup>

MbS said in 2018, “Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible.”<sup>353</sup> Contrary to this statement, experts generally agree that the Saudis are unlikely to convert their civilian nuclear technology into a nuclear weapons program.<sup>354</sup> Not only would it take years to develop a single nuclear warhead, but doing so would violate the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, inspection agreements with the IAEA, and would sever the kingdom’s access to U.S. technologies and arms.<sup>355</sup> Developing its nuclear technology may, however, leave the Iranian regime in suspense about Saudi’s nuclear weapon capability and prove to be a deterrent by itself. Further, some experts assess that the Saudis may already have access to nuclear weapons via the Pakistanis. Simon Henderson, Director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at the Washington Institute, wrote, “The assumption is that Pakistan’s nuclear-tipped missiles could be sent to the kingdom, either to boost Saudi deterrence against Iran or to safeguard part of Pakistan’s strategic force in time of crisis with India.”<sup>356</sup>

In MbS’ more recent words (2021), “The Kingdom stresses the importance of seriously and effectively dealing with the Iranian nuclear and missile program in a way that contributes to achieving regional and international security and stability.”<sup>357</sup> For the Saudi autocracy,

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<sup>352</sup> Jodi Vittori, “American Weapons in the Wrong Hands,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 19, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/19/american-weapons-in-wrong-hands-pub-78408>.

<sup>353</sup> “Saudi Crown Prince: If Iran Develops Nuclear Bomb, so Will We,” *CBS News*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-iran-nuclear-bomb-saudi-arabia/>.

<sup>354</sup> Michael Young, “Does Saudi Arabia Intend to Develop a Nuclear Weapons Capability?,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, March 8, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/75723>.

<sup>355</sup> Mark Mazzetti, David E. Sanger, and William J. Broad, “U.S. Examines Whether Saudi Nuclear Program Could Lead to Bomb Effort,” *New York Times*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/us/politics/us-examines-saudi-nuclear-program.html>.

<sup>356</sup> Young, “Does Saudi Arabia Intend to Develop a Nuclear Weapons Capability?,” <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/75723>.

<sup>357</sup> Tuqa Khalid, Saudi Arabia Seeks Serious Approach to Iran’s Nuclear, Missile Programs: Crown Prince,” *Al-Arabiya*, December 15, 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/12/15/Saudi-Arabia-seeks-serious-approach-to-iran-s-nuclear-missile-programs-Crown-Prince>.

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“effectively dealing” with Iran’s missile programs appears to be creating a ballistic missile program of its own. This decision is almost certainly linked with the JCPOA negotiations and heightened fears that the repealing of nuclear sanctions would flush Iran with more cash to build-up Shia militia groups and arsenals. While renewing the JCPOA may temporarily slow nuclear enrichment activity, the Gulf probably fears that the arms race and proxy wars that could follow the deal may push Tehran to procure the bomb anyway.

**Economic Factors Driving the Saudi-Iranian Cold War**

Saudi Arabia and Iran compete in this cold war under opposite economic circumstances and alter their strategies against each other accordingly. The world has long depended on Gulf oil, and the West has guaranteed the unobstructed flow of Middle Eastern energy for decades until recent years. This oil-for-security relationship has served Saudi Arabia well financially, though it has fostered an unsustainable rentier system domestically and regionally, and has made the kingdom militarily dependent on the United States. Iran is politically and economically isolated with few allies or trade partners. Iran too has oil and natural gas but must offload its energy at a discount to China and other anti-West consumers to survive economically. Despite economic hardship, Iran is militarily superior to Saudi Arabia in terms of sheer numbers, combat experience, and indigenous weapons systems development, and continues to fund its proxies abroad.

The following sections outline Saudi Arabia’s and Iran’s unique and contrasting economic circumstances to illustrate the respective regime’s strategies to impose financial costs on each other. As will be shown, the Saudi economic model relies heavily on oil revenues to purchase loyalties of nation-states and international partners, while Iran funnels nearly all its limited funds to proxies intent on disrupting the same states and Saudi Arabia directly. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 created potential new economic opportunities for both Saudi Arabia and Iran, but the Saudis are more likely to reap the benefits of the energy windfall. The war and subsequent increased oil demand strengthens Saudi’s posture in the cold war against Iran, as the war could further isolate Iran without a renewal of the JCPOA.

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*Saudi Oil Wealth: Purchased Alliances*

Saudi's most valuable asset in its cold war against Iran has been its petrodollars and its ability to pump a seemingly endless flow of cash into Saudi-friendly governments or institutions. Petrodollars rescued the likes of Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt in 2013, Rafik Hariri in Lebanon, and Jordan's King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein, to name a few.<sup>358</sup> In tandem, the Saudi royal family has relied on its oil wealth to sustain its decades-held rentier model to ensure domestic legitimacy and stability via the state's generous social welfare programs.<sup>359</sup> Dr. Yossi Mann postulated that reductions in government subsidies or diminished welfare cuts would likely lead citizens of rentier states like Saudi Arabia to question their ruler's legitimacy.<sup>360</sup> Without assured regime security at home, an autocrat like MbS could fan the flames of the Saudi-Iran conflict to stoke nationalist fervor as a distraction from poor governance.

This social contract set up in the 1970s and 1980s has allowed the royal family to consolidate its power, crush dissent, and live a life of exorbitance. However, the 2014 oil crisis and its aftermath proved to many MENA countries that their costly welfare programs may not be sustainable.<sup>361</sup> Recognizing that this social contract is unsustainable in the long term, MbS introduced Vision 2030 in 2016 intending to eventually replace Saudi's oil-centric model with a robust and diversified private sector.<sup>362</sup> If the crown prince successfully implements economic reform in connection with some of his social reforms, Riyadh could attract foreign investors (and therefore potentially new allies) while simultaneously offering new jobs and opportunities to the hopeful youth population. New international investments and partners coupled with a satisfied

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<sup>358</sup> "The End of the Arab World's Oil Age is Nigh," *Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/07/18/the-end-of-the-arab-worlds-oil-age-is-nigh>.

<sup>359</sup> Joseph Bahout and Perry Cammack, "Arab Political Economy: Pathways for Equitable Growth," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 9, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/09/arab-political-economy-pathways-for-equitable-growth-pub-77416>.

<sup>360</sup> Yossi Mann, "Oil—A Factor Promoting or Undermining Stability in the Countries of the Middle East?," *Comparative Strategy* 40, no. 5 (Sep 20, 2021): 464, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2021.1939613>.

<sup>361</sup> Mann, "Oil—A Factor Promoting or Undermining Stability in the Countries of the Middle East?," 460-462.

<sup>362</sup> Bahout and Cammack, "Arab Political Economy," <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/09/arab-political-economy-pathways-for-equitable-growth-pub-77416>.

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youth constituency would likely strengthen Saudi Arabia's position to further isolate Iran economically and continue propping up regional states where the Iranian regime attempts to assert authority.

MbS sends mixed messages to the international community on the future of oil production in the kingdom. On one hand, the Saudi Green Initiative promises Saudi leadership in the global energy transition with plans to cut global methane emissions by 30 percent, plant 10 billion trees in Saudi Arabia, rely on renewable energy sources to power 50 percent of the kingdom's energy needs, and investing SAR 700 billion (\$186 billion) towards climate initiatives overall by 2030.<sup>363</sup> On the other hand, the crown prince intends to keep fossil fuels at the forefront of Saudi's economy by doubling its gas production and increasing its oil production capacity by one million barrels a day to fund his mega-projects and pompous living standards.<sup>364</sup> In short, MbS ironically counts on increased oil production to push the Saudi economy into a climate-friendly future where entertainment, new cities, and the private sector replace the source of the kingdom's wealth. For now, the crown prince and OPEC contend that with emerging technologies including carbon capture, oil can remain a viable, clean, and necessary energy resource for decades to come.<sup>365</sup> The Russia-Ukraine war likely hardened these convictions, as will be discussed at a later point.

### *Iran's Economic Resilience Despite Disadvantages*

Tehran does not have excess cash to lend to its proxies in the same way that Riyadh does, but funding its proxies and supplying them with weapons is critical to Iran's interests. Tehran has proven that the IRGC, proxies, and the regime can get by financially despite heavy international

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<sup>363</sup> Saudi Green Initiative, "The Saudi Green Initiative Aims to Improve Quality of Life," accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.saudigreeninitiative.org/about-saudi-green-initiative/>; David Ottaway, "Saudi Arabia's Green Initiative Aims to Exonerate Fossil Fuel Advocacy," *Wilson Center*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/saudi-arabias-green-initiative-aims-exonerate-fossil-fuel-advocacy>.

<sup>364</sup> Mohammed bin Salman, "Vision 2030," April 25, 2016, 43, [https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi\\_vision203.pdf](https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf); Ottaway, "Saudi Arabia's Green Initiative Aims to Exonerate Fossil Fuel Advocacy," <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/saudi-arabias-green-initiative-aims-exonerate-fossil-fuel-advocacy>.

<sup>365</sup> OPEC, COP 25/CMP 15/CMA 2, [https://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/en/press\\_room/5809.htm](https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/press_room/5809.htm).

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sanctions (albeit at the expense of the Iranian population). Iran's oil and natural gas exports play a key role in the country's and regime's economic survival. Restoring the JCPOA, or a deal similar in scope, would dispatch tens of millions of barrels of stored Iranian oil within a few months into the global supply chain and likely make Iran more competitive in its petrochemical competition with Saudi Arabia in the long term.<sup>366</sup> In the meantime, Tehran is attempting to establish trade relations with regional partners to alleviate some of Iran's economic burdens. In May 2022, for example, Iran and Oman agreed to jointly develop the Hengam oil field and to increase air and sea traffic between their two countries.<sup>367</sup>

Iran impressively manages to sustain its proxies despite economic hardship. The State Department estimated in 2018 that Iran furnished Hizballah with \$700 million annually, \$100 million combined to Palestinian terrorist groups annually, \$4.6 billion in credit to the Assad regime, and hundreds of millions to the Houthis in Yemen, with \$16 billion spent overall since 2012 in propping up these groups.<sup>368</sup> Iran's economy is relatively more diversified than most countries in the Middle East, but the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported in 2018 that crude oil revenue accounted for 40 percent of Iran's total government revenues in 2016 (the most recent data available). Approximately 51 percent of those crude oil exports were destined for China in 2020.<sup>369</sup>

China has proven to be a lifeline to Iran by purchasing more Iranian oil than any other country and at a discount.<sup>370</sup> In March 2021, China struck a deal to invest \$400 billion into Iran

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<sup>366</sup> Golnar Motevalli, "How the Iran Nuclear Deal Could Affect Oil, Trade and Security," *Bloomberg*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-07/how-an-iran-nuclear-deal-could-affect-oil-trade-and-security>.

<sup>367</sup> Adam Lucente, "Iran, Oman to Jointly Develop Oil Field," *Al-Monitor*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/iran-oman-jointly-develop-oil-field>.

<sup>368</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities," December 2018, 10-11, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Iran-Report.pdf>.

<sup>369</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), "Country Analysis Executive Summary: Iran," July 16, 2021, 2, [https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries\\_long/Iran/pdf/iran\\_exe.pdf](https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Iran/pdf/iran_exe.pdf).

<sup>370</sup> Chen Aizhu and Alex Lawler, "China Buys More Iranian Oil Now Than it did Before Sanctions, Data Shows," *Reuters*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-buys-more-iranian-oil-now-than-it-did-before-sanctions-data-shows-2022-03-01/>.

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over 25 years in exchange for much-needed oil.<sup>371</sup> Importantly, however, Iranian oil only accounted for approximately 3 percent of Chinese oil imports in 2020, lagging far behind Saudi Arabia's 15 percent and Iraq's 9 percent.<sup>372</sup> Saudi Arabia exported its highest ever volume of crude oil to China in 2020, doubling its previous record and surpassing Russia as China's top oil producer.<sup>373</sup> RAND analyst Ashley Rhoades and Wilson Center fellow Dalia Dassa Kaye assess that Beijing invests in Iranian energy primarily as a "backstop in the event of a conflict with the United States."<sup>374</sup> Rhoades and Kaye further contend that an enduring Sino-Iranian partnership is unlikely, given that China prioritizes trade (including weapons sales) with many of Iran's enemies including Israel and the Gulf States.<sup>375</sup>

Unable to compete economically, the Iranian regime attempts to disrupt Saudi oil exports by attacking Saudi oil facilities directly and through proxies. In 2019, Iranian UAVs and missiles struck the Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais, temporarily shutting down more than 5 percent of the global oil supply.<sup>376</sup> The Houthis—who procure funds, weapons, and training from the IRGC-QF and Hizballah—targeted petroleum tanks at Ras Tanura port, Saudi's largest oil

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<sup>371</sup> Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers, "China, With \$400 Billion Iran Deal, Could Deep Influence in Mideast," *New York Times*, March 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/27/world/middleeast/china-iran-deal.html>.

<sup>372</sup> Ashley Rhoades and Dalia Dassa Kaye, "China Does Not Have to be America's Enemy in the Middle East," *War on the Rocks*, April 19, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/china-does-not-have-to-be-americas-enemy-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>373</sup> Charles Kennedy, "China's Oil Import From Saudi Arabia Jump to Record High," *Oil Price*, June 26, 2020, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/General/Chinas-Oil-Imports-From-Saudi-Arabia-Jump-To-Record-High.html>. See also Earl Carr, "The U.S., Gulf States & China: Oil, Power, and Geo-Strategic Influence," *Forbes*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/earlcarr/2020/09/25/the-us-gulf-states-and-china-oil-power--geo-strategic-influence/?sh=4851fbc670d5>.

<sup>374</sup> Rhoades and Kaye, "China Does Not Have to be America's Enemy in the Middle East," <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/china-does-not-have-to-be-americas-enemy-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>375</sup> Rhoades and Kaye, "China Does Not Have to be America's Enemy in the Middle East," <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/china-does-not-have-to-be-americas-enemy-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>376</sup> Humeyra Pamuk, "Exclusive: U.S. Probe of Saudi Oil Attack Shows it Came From North – Report," *Reuters*, December 19, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks-iran-exclusive/exclusive-u-s-probe-of-saudi-oil-attack-shows-it-came-from-north-report-idUSKBN1YN299>.

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refinery, in March 2021.<sup>377</sup> One year later a drone struck the Aramco YASREF refinery.<sup>378</sup> For Tehran to compete with Riyadh on the regional stage, it not only needs to rely on its limited revenues to prop up forward militia groups but also seeks to hit the kingdom where it is most vulnerable economically.

*The Russia-Ukraine War's Impact on Saudi-Iran Economic Competition*

Before Russia invaded Ukraine in February of 2022, Saudi Arabia (along with the other oil exporters) received immense pressure from the international community to prioritize climate change initiatives.<sup>379</sup> Had the Saudis failed to keep up with the energy transition, Riyadh's ability to prop up Saudi-friendly regimes may have been frustrated over time, as there will likely be a growing pressure in the West on oil exporters to diversify away from carbon-intensive methods of production making oil sales to Western states politically complicated. Instead, the Russia-Ukraine war and subsequent sanctions on Russian oil and imports likely deepened MbS' convictions that the world will always need Saudi oil.<sup>380</sup> In April 2021, MbS declared that he expected the United States' and Russia's oil outputs to collapse within 20 years and that the world would once again rely on Saudi Arabia to fill the energy gap.<sup>381</sup> Though the Russian

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<sup>377</sup> Summer Said and Stephen Kalin, "Iran-Backed Houthi Rebels Say they Targeted Saudi Oil Port," *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-backed-houthi-rebels-say-they-targeted-saudi-oil-port-11615157185>; AFP, "Houthi Drone Attack Causes 'Temporary Reduction,' in Saudi Oil Output," *Times of Israel*, March 20, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/houthi-drone-attack-causes-temporary-reduction-in-saudi-oil-output/>.

<sup>378</sup> AFP, "Houthi Drone Attack Causes 'Temporary Reduction,' in Saudi Oil Output," *Times of Israel*, March 20, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/houthi-drone-attack-causes-temporary-reduction-in-saudi-oil-output/>.

<sup>379</sup> Ephrem Kossaiy, "Saudi Arabia 'Deeply Involved' in Shift to Renewable Energy, Says Kerry," *Arab News*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1886786/saudi-arabia>.

<sup>380</sup> David Gaffen, "Aramco CEO says Ukraine Invasion has Accelerated Global Energy Crisis," *Reuters*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/ceraweek-opec-has-no-control-over-events-roiling-global-oil-markets-sec-gen-2022-03-07/>.

<sup>381</sup> Ottaway, "Saudi Arabia's Green Initiative Aims to Exonerate Fossil Fuel Advocacy," <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/saudi-arabias-green-initiative-aims-exonerate-fossil-fuel-advocacy>.

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invasion was likely not the scenario he envisioned, MbS appeared to be correct: the world will continue relying on Saudi energy for the foreseeable future.

MbS' views are not inconsistent with what OPEC predicts will be the future of the oil industry. OPEC predicted that oil will not reach peak demand until at least 2035 where it will then plateau for decades.<sup>382</sup> This contrasts with the International Energy Agency's 2021 estimates, which predict peak oil demand in 2025 if stated net-zero emission targets are met on time (known as the Announced Pledges Scenario), or by the mid-2030s based on what policies have actually been put in place or are under development (the Stated Policies Scenario).<sup>383</sup> As both of these estimates pre-date the Russian invasion of Ukraine, post-peak oil demand is almost certainly even further away. Oil demand and oil prices are the highest they've been for over a decade, strengthening the kingdom's position as the world's energy arbiter and regional hegemon.<sup>384</sup>

The Russia-Ukraine war potentially creates energy export opportunities for Iran too, but Iran's economic isolation and close ties to Russia complicate its trade prospects. Iranian President Raisi and Supreme Leader Khamenei unequivocally supported the Russian invasion citing NATO expansion as a threat to the region and that "U.S. interference through velvet movements and color coups ... pulled Ukraine into where it is now."<sup>385</sup> Russia's stated motives closely align with the IRGC's forward defense policies and justifications for venturing into countries uninvited.<sup>386</sup> For Iran to begin exporting oil to countries other than China, however, the

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<sup>382</sup> Alex Lawler, "OPEC Forecasts Oil Demand Rebound Before Post-2035 Plateau," <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/opec-sees-oil-demand-rebounding-then-plateauing-after-2035-2021-09-28/>.

<sup>383</sup> International Energy Agency, *World Energy Outlook 2021* (Paris: International Energy Agency, 2021), 16, 19.

<sup>384</sup> Anthony Di Paola and Sheela and Sheela Tobben, "Saudi Arabia Hike Oil Prices as Crude Surges on Ukraine War," *Bloomberg*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-04/saudi-arabia-raises-oil-prices-as-commodities-surge-on-ukraine>.

<sup>385</sup> Dene, Labow, and Silber, "Middle East Responses to the Ukraine Crisis," <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-east-responses-ukraine-crisis>.

<sup>386</sup> Ali Fathollah-Nejed, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Nature of Iranian-Russian Relations," *Middle East Institute*, March 21, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-invasion-ukraine-and-nature-iranian-russian-relations>.

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JCPOA must be revived. Paradoxically, Russia sabotaged the latest JCPOA talks in March 2022, demanding that the war-imposed sanctions will not affect Russia-Iran trade deals.<sup>387</sup> In June 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in Tehran to revisit the JCPOA discussion.<sup>388</sup> Like China, Russia may be using Iran as a backstop to prepare for Russia's uncertain future in the world economy after the war is over.

It is too soon to project the long-term economic consequences of the war in Europe, but the war demonstrated the world's reliance on Middle Eastern energy and the subsequent importance of strategic partnerships. Saudi Arabia and Iran will likely strengthen existing trade interdependencies and seek new security partnerships to bolster their regional hegemony. The IMF predicted in April 2022 that the oil-rich Gulf States will highly benefit from the war, while oil importers in MENA will greatly suffer.<sup>389</sup> Saudi Arabia's projected growth rate jumped 2.8 points to 7.6 percent in the three months following the initial invasion according to the IMF.<sup>390</sup> As the prices of energy and food climb and inflation rises, Riyadh will be in a position to continue purchasing the loyalties of non-oil countries like Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine. These, and other MENA countries, heavily depend on Saudi remittances, which account for nearly 10 percent of the GDP in some countries according to an *Economist* estimate.<sup>391</sup> Iran will likely seek to capitalize on regional angst and economic instability while also trying to contain its own suffering population.

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<sup>387</sup> Parisa Hafezi, Francois Murphy, and John Irish, "Iranian Nuclear Talks Clouded by Russian Demands," *Reuters*, March 7, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/iranian-nuclear-talks-clouded-by-russian-demands-2022-03-06/>.

<sup>388</sup> "Iran Hopeful Nuclear Talks Will Resume as Russian FM Visits," *Al-Monitor*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/iran-hopeful-nuclear-talks-will-resume-russian-fm-visits>.

<sup>389</sup> Andrew Parasiliti and Elizabeth Hagedorn, "The Takeaway: Ukraine War Worsens Middle East Oil Gap," *Al-Monitor*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/takeaway-ukraine-war-worsens-middle-east-oil-gap>.

<sup>390</sup> Parasiliti and Hagedorn, "The Takeaway: Ukraine War Worsens Middle East Oil Gap," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/takeaway-ukraine-war-worsens-middle-east-oil-gap>.

<sup>391</sup> "The End of the Arab World's Oil Age is Nigh," <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/07/18/the-end-of-the-arab-worlds-oil-age-is-nigh>.

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*Oil Politics and the Changing Security Landscape*

Current oil politics and Middle East states' responses to the Russia-Ukraine crisis reflect a deeper concern facing Middle Eastern countries: perceived U.S. withdrawal from the region. The Gulf States, in particular, are leery in backing either side of the Ukraine conflict and instead may be watching the U.S. response to determine American intentions in the region.<sup>392</sup> Saudi Arabia and the UAE initially refused Washington's request to pump more oil as fuel prices skyrocketed in the U.S. and Europe over the palpable enmity between President Biden and MbS.<sup>393</sup> Not until June 2022 (over three months after the Russian invasion) did OPEC+ agree to modestly boost oil production.<sup>394</sup> The Saudi crown prince also may not wish to offend the one person—Vladimir Putin—that respected him at the December 2018 G20 summit following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.<sup>395</sup> Instead, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi recognize the unique position they are in to dangle oil production capability in front of U.S. policymakers that have shown restraint on Saudi's war in Yemen, Houthi missile strikes over Abu Dhabi, and in Iranian JCPOA demands.<sup>396</sup>

Without security guarantees from the West, the Saudis and Emirates seek to restore direct communication with Iran to keep diplomacy on the table. Iranian-American scholar Vali Nasr captured this issue in a 2021 article for *Foreign Affairs*:

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<sup>392</sup> Margaret Dene, Hannah Labow, and Carol Silber, "Middle East Responses to the Ukraine Crisis," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-east-responses-ukraine-crisis>.

<sup>393</sup> David S. Cloud, Benoit Faucon, and Summer Said, "U.S. Diplomatic Push for Ukraine Falts in a Middle East Influenced by Russia," *Wall Street Journal*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-diplomatic-push-for-ukraine-falts-in-a-middle-east-influenced-by-russia-11646214130>. See also David Ottaway, "Saudi Arabia Chooses Putin Over Biden on Ukraine to Keep Oil Prices High," *Wilson Center*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/saudi-arabia-chooses-putin-over-biden-ukraine-keep-oil-prices-high>.

<sup>394</sup> "OPEC+ Alliance Agrees to Production Increase," *Al-Monitor*, June 2, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/opec-alliance-agrees-production-increase>.

<sup>395</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Analysis: Gulf States Cautiously Navigate War on Ukraine," *Al-Jazeera*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/4/analysis-gulf-states-cautiously-navigate-war-on-ukraine>.

<sup>396</sup> Dion Nissenbaum, Stephen Kalin, and David S. Cloud, "Saudi, Emirati Leaders Decline Calls with Biden During Ukraine Crisis," *Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-emirati-leaders-decline-calls-with-biden-during-ukraine-crisis-11646779430>.

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In the midst of all of [reduced U.S. presence and Iranian expansion], the Sunni Arab states are in search of new strategies to protect their interests. They have thus far relied on the United States to contain the expansion of Iran's regional influence, an expansion Washington itself set in motion when it invaded Iraq. But the U.S. departure from Afghanistan, talk of a reduced U.S. military presence in Iraq, and the Biden administration's desire to end the "forever wars" have compelled Saudi Arabia and the UAE to start talking to Iran in the hopes of reducing tensions and buying time to build their own regional capabilities.<sup>397</sup>

Saudi-Iranian diplomatic détente may not be such a bad thing, but many unresolved conflicts prevent the normalization of ties such as the wars in Yemen and Syria, Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile program, and Saudi's warming relationship with Israel.

**Estimate**

The Saudi-Iran cold war is likely to escalate on at least two fronts into the year 2030 based on the underlying four issues analyzed for this conflict. First, the crown prince's and supreme leader's commitments to their respective Islamic governing models protract the gruesome proxy wars already occurring throughout MENA and carry a high probability for additional proxy wars as opportunities to influence weak states present themselves. In conjunction, the ruthless leadership imposed by the current king and supreme leader could result in chaotic power transitions upon their deaths, resulting in opportunities to instigate regime change in both countries. These escalations are compounded by the extremist doctrine of *takfirism*. The Saudi crown prince will likely tolerate the Salafi doctrine from a distance, as it produces *jihadists* that vehemently oppose the Iranian regime and its proxies. Finally, Saudi's new interest in building a ballistic missile program to strike Iran directly also catalyzes the prospect of a direct war with Iran.

Second, the unexpected boost in world oil demand and energy prices as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war prolongs the Saudi-Iran conflict. The energy-price windfall extends Riyadh's ability to entrench authoritarianism abroad and retain its social contract at home. Contrastingly, Iran remains isolated without sanctions relief and will likely find itself ensnared

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<sup>397</sup> Nasr, "All Against All," <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-12-02/iran-middle-east-all-against-all>.

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by the transactional relationships it holds with Russia and China. Neither Russia nor China likely have an appetite for fueling the Saudi-Iran rivalry. However, it appears both countries share an interest in keeping Iran afloat financially to use as a pawn in a separate cold war of strategic power competition between Russia, China, and the United States. Sanctions relief under a renewed JCPOA could broaden Iran's ally circle, accelerate the petrochemical competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and provide additional funding to Iran's proxy groups abroad.

*Protracted and New Proxy Wars*

MbS' future in Saudi Arabia—whether as king for life or overthrown by opponents—plays a critical part in estimating the trajectory of Saudi relations with Iran and the rest of MENA. His youthful ambitions of modernizing the kingdom, moderating the Wahhabi brand, and distancing the royal family from Washington, stand in stark contrast to his aged father's policies and those of his predecessors. The crown prince does not consider his age to be a handicap and likens himself to a young Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg.<sup>398</sup> This millennial attitude likely resonates with the urban youth but also drives a wedge between himself and older conservatives, resulting in instability and possible extremism within the kingdom. Upon the death of King Salman, the political and clerical enemies of the crown prince may attempt to overthrow MbS and his inner circle, possibly with the aid of terrorist groups that adhere to *takfiri* ideology such as ISIS.

Despite the insider threat that *takfirism* poses to the prince, this extremist ideology permits MbS to deter Shiite expansion and afflict the Iranian regime from afar. As more Arab partners become cautious of a direct conflict with Iran and withdraw from Saudi-led proxy engagements, *takfiri* militants become an inconvenient—but effective—Shia-killing syndicate. MbS almost certainly will continue purporting his liberal reform narratives and publicly denounce extremism, but MbS is unlikely to abandon *takfirism* as a delegitimization tool while it currently is serving his interests more than it is harming them. The number of *takfiri* militants is likely to expand throughout the kingdom and especially in weak states with large Shiite populations such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The supreme leader, in turn, likely will

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<sup>398</sup> Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'," <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>.

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continue to label all Saudi-based Sunnis as *takfiri* militants into 2030 to justify the regime's expensive and chaotic forward defense policies.

Khamenei faces the same internal threat as MbS but for opposite reasons. Where MbS seeks to distance himself from the old Wahhabi label and modernize the kingdom, Khamenei preserves Khomeini's old revolutionary ideology and commands the most versatile fighting force in the Middle East to defend it. As presented earlier in the chapter, perhaps the greatest threat to Khamenei right now is the growing Iranian nationalist movement and the possibility that the revolutionary mindset will die with him. The Iranian elite may attempt to alleviate both threats by fanning the flames of the Saudi-Iran cold war (distracting the nationalists from domestic grievances) and by alleviating some financial hardships. In the meantime, the supreme leader will likely continue prioritizing the objectives of the 1979 revolution through 2030, namely the eradication of Israel and the expulsion of Americanism from the MENA region.

The arms race between the Saudis and Iran could bring the two countries closer to a conventional war, more so than the other drivers discussed in this chapter. Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs remain the most consequential avenue in executing both of Khomeini's pillars of eradicating Israel and driving out American influence. As of June 2022, the JCPOA negotiations have stalled over Iran's insistence that the U.S. remove its label of the IRGC as a terrorist organization, and Iranian officials will not agree to the requirement for International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of the four nuclear sites.<sup>399</sup>

For its ballistic missile program, the U.S. Treasury sanctioned key facilitators of Iran's ballistic missile program in response to Iran's missile strike strikes in Erbil, Iraq and on Saudi Aramco facilities in March 2022. Brian E. Nelson, Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, said, "While the United States continues to seek Iran's return to full compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, we will not hesitate to target those who support Iran's ballistic missile program. We will also work with other partners in the region to hold Iran accountable for its actions, including gross violations of the sovereignty

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<sup>399</sup> Alexander Ward and Nahal Toosi, "Biden Made Final Decision to Keep Iran's IRGC on Terrorist List," *Politico*, May 24, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/24/biden-final-decision-iran-revolutionary-guard-terrorist-00034789>; Mazias Motamedi, "Iran: JCPOA Agreement Possible as Soon as 'Red Lines' Considered," *Al-Jazeera*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/4/iran-jcpoa-agreement-possible-as-soon-as-red-lines-considered>.

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of its neighbors.”<sup>400</sup> It’s unclear whether those “other partners in the region” are the Saudis and their developing missile program, but the supreme leader is unlikely to curb the production of its most formidable weapon while the Saudis are trying to level its weapons capabilities with Iran’s.

Should the respective regimes and continued hatred exist into the next decade, the proxy wars in Syria and Yemen will continue to 2030 unless international counterparts intervene. The Saudi and Iranian elite are losing regional allies to fight their battles for them and will likely need international mitigation to resolve any ongoing proxy wars. For Iranian officials, the Russian military is the obvious choice as a security provider because of their leaders’ shared interest in preserving the Assad regime. MbS may request Russian weapons pending the conclusion of the Ukraine war but is equally likely to support Israeli military cooperation and some lesser version of the Abraham Accords. Upon ascension as king, MbS may be confronted with difficult decisions on how to balance the Iranian threat vice the conservative clerical establishment and domestic population when considering openly working with the Israelis.

*Geopolitical Pressures Prolonging the Saudi-Iran Cold War*

The likelihood of direct confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran increases if neither country can find a suitable global power to support their rival regional objectives. Hossein Salami, Commander in Chief of the IRGC, announced in June 2022 the “flight and defeat” of the U.S., likely in reference to the perceived U.S. withdrawal from the region.<sup>401</sup> Salami’s comments are ill-timed with the announced visit of President Biden to both Israel and Saudi Arabia in July 2022.<sup>402</sup> If the Saudis perceive that the U.S. is no longer a reliable security partner, Riyadh and Tehran will likely race for Russian and Chinese economic and security agreements. Russia’s future post-Ukraine war is uncertain, but China certainly would welcome economic competition

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<sup>400</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Key Actors in Iran’s Ballistic Missile Program,” Press Release, March 30, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0689>.

<sup>401</sup> “Iran’s IRGC Says US is Retreating from Region,” *Al-Monitor*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/irans-irgc-says-us-retreating-region>.

<sup>402</sup> Peter Baker, “Biden Trip to Saudi Arabia is Set, but Energy Help is Not,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/14/us/politics/biden-saudi-arabia-israel-trip.html>.

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between the two energy-rich countries.<sup>403</sup> China already attempts to balance the Saudi-Iran rivalry by purchasing Iranian oil to offset U.S. sanctions and participating in joint military exercises with both countries.<sup>404</sup>

In a direct confrontation, Riyadh lags far behind the training and battlefield experience like that of the IRGC-QF. The Revolutionary Guard Corps and its proxies have shown resilient military capability without international support and with less funding than the Saudis. In a prolonged direct war between the Saudi's inadequately trained (but well-equipped) fighting force and Iran's thoroughly proven Shia militia forces and proxies, Saudi Arabia is likely to lose. Saudi chances of victory increase if the country develops an equally formidable ballistic missile program with help from the Chinese or normalizes relations with the region's undisputed military leader—Israel.

The Saudi-Iranian power struggle likely cannot be resolved in the next decade without first mitigating the conflicting, ideologically based Islamic governing models, ending *takfiri* teachings, and managing the arms race. Geopolitical pressures and the changing security landscape in the MENA region prolong the cold war. As the historical events discussed in this chapter show, the rivalry intensified with each subsequent regional war (the Iran-Iraq War and the War on Terror) and political movement (the Iranian revolution and Arab Spring). Near-future events like the possible re-institution of the JCPOA, Saudi development of a ballistic missile program, instability as a result of supply chain issues and the war in Ukraine, or new strategic alliances threaten to push this rivalry to new heights, including a direct conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

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<sup>403</sup> Julia Gurol and Jacopo Scita, "China's Persian Gulf Strategy: Keep Tehran and Riyadh Content," *Atlantic Council*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/chinas-persian-gulf-strategy-keep-tehran-and-riyadh-content/>.

<sup>404</sup> Gurol and Scita, "China's Persian Gulf Strategy," <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/chinas-persian-gulf-strategy-keep-tehran-and-riyadh-content/>.

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## CHAPTER 4

**ISLAMIC POLITICAL MOVEMENTS AND THE MONARCHIES**

The cold war between political Islamists—with state sponsors such as Turkey and Qatar—and the Gulf monarchies is responsible for many protracted civil conflicts throughout the MENA region today and will likely foster new or renewed political strife in weak states through 2030. At least three examples support this conclusion. First, the original success stories of the Arab Spring—Tunisia and Egypt—remain in political and economic crisis a decade later under increasingly oppressive regimes that prioritize the demobilization of their respective state’s Islamic political parties. Second, some Gulf states such as UAE and Bahrain maintain frosty relations with political Islamism’s state sponsors Turkey and Qatar and appear to entertain rapprochement only out of economic necessity or opportunity. Lastly, the civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen showcase the long-term consequences of unresolved, irreconcilable ideologies between political Islamist movements and oppressive autocracies.

As Ayoob and Lussier have already stated, estimating the collective trajectory of political Islamism is generally not possible given that these movements emerge respective to their individual political contexts.<sup>405</sup> Political Islamists compete with different categories of authoritarianism such as the Wahhabist monarchy of Saudi Arabia, the secular-oriented regime in the UAE, military dictatorships like that of El-Sisi in Egypt, and various hybrid models of constitutional monarchies and democracy as in Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait, and Bahrain. The Arab Spring was an exception in that Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation, and the structural grievances affecting a significant subsection of MENA countries at that time, set off a domino effect throughout the region that no one expected. Seizing their moment, Islamist political groups like Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) successfully took control of their countries in break-away elections. Looking towards 2030, the future status of individual Islamist (former or current) political groups, their state sponsors, and the monarchical opposition to political Islamism will be attempted here by analyzing the fundamental drivers of this cold war.

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<sup>405</sup> Ayoob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 163.

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Three fundamental elements drive the broader cold war between political Islamists and the Middle East monarchies. First, is the durable power or appeal of Islamic political groups, their ability to attract followers, and the perceived threat that strong Islamic political movements pose to the monarchies. Second, is how the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Bahrain seek to demobilize Islamist movements regionally through antagonistic geopolitical struggle against Turkey and Qatar, which are the main state sponsors of such movements. Third, is the monarchies' destabilizing and ineffective methods employed to demobilize political Islamist movements domestically. While political Islamism exists to some degree under all the authoritarian categories mentioned above, this chapter prioritizes the more outspoken authoritarian opponents of political Islam, namely the Saudi Arabian, Emirati, and Egyptian monarchies.

### **Power of Political Islamist Groups**

At the center of the cold war between the monarchies of the Middle East and Islamic political groups are the two entities' opposing views on the rights of citizens, authority, and the overarching question of whether Islam and democracy are compatible.<sup>406</sup> Former Ambassador of India to Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Yemen, Talmiz Ahmad, defined "political Islam" the following way:

Political Islam is the effort to imbue a political order with the values and principles of Islam. It has three broad expressions: one, Wahhabiyya, the ideological foundation of Saudi Arabia, that is 'quietist' in that the ruler is the repository of all political authority while his people owe him loyalty and obedience; two, the activist Muslim Brotherhood that is a grassroots movement whose political platform seeks to blend the tenets of Islam with the principles of Western-style parliamentary democracy, with a constitution, political parties, free elections, human rights, and equal rights for women and minorities; the third expression is referred to as "Salafi-jihadism", that draws from its reading of Islamic texts and commentaries the authority to use violence to defend the faith and its adherents.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> Khalid Manzoor Butt and Naeema Siddiqui, "Compatibility Between Islam and Democracy," *A Research Journal of South Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2018): 515.

<sup>407</sup> Talmiz Ahmad, "The Enduring 'Arab Spring'," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 15, no. 2 (April-June 2020): 98.

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The Arab Spring demonstrated how the power Islamic political groups like the MB can amass through the political process in some states and fuel instability in others. Both of those outcomes, amassing power and fueling instability, are precisely what the monarchical governments sought to contain during the uprisings, because they challenge the status quo social contract between ruler and citizen.<sup>408</sup> Today, the quartet monarchs (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain) strive to limit political Islamist influence in their countries, in effect keeping the cold war alive by refusing to compromise or reconcile, as will be shown in detail in the last section of this chapter.

It is important to note that although Islamists played a critical role during the uprisings, they were by no means the sole participants in the protests. Participants in the Arab Spring included diverse populations of “Muslims and Christians, Islamists and secularists, lower and middle classes, and urban and rural communities.”<sup>409</sup> This chapter is scoped primarily to Islamists who qualify under the first two expressions of political Islam found in Ahmad’s definition above, namely the politically quietist *Wahhabiyya* or *Salafiyya* on the one hand, and political Islamist groups such as the MB and its affiliates or movements inspired by it, such as Tunisia’s Ennahda Movement. *Jihadism* will only be treated insofar as to assess some monarchies’ claims that groups like the MB are radical and promote violence. Egypt and the UAE apply the *jihadist* label to the MB to justify their repressive laws and policies against such groups, as will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

*Attraction of Political Islamist Movements*

Though many populations in the MENA countries share structural grievances in the economic, social, and political spheres, it likely wasn’t until the Arab Spring that the opulent monarchs realized the old social contract between ruler and citizen was in jeopardy.<sup>410</sup> Dr. Kamal Eldin Osman Salih, Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science at Kuwait University, assessed in 2013 that the following factors ignited the uprisings:

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<sup>408</sup> Ahmad, “The Enduring Arab Spring,” 96.

<sup>409</sup> Ahmad, “The Enduring ‘Arab Spring’,” 93.

<sup>410</sup> Ahmad, “The Enduring ‘Arab Spring’,” 94.

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Long-term, embedded structural factors leading to the Arab Spring comprise corruption, State repression, denial of political freedoms, the failure of the traditional powers to accommodate and recognize new youth movements, the development of gaps between the various regions inside one country, the domination of economic resources by the few through the alliance of State authority and the capital of powerful private individuals, and the spread of poverty and unemployment among massive swathes of the population.<sup>411</sup>

These structural factors, coupled with spontaneous catalysts such as “Mohammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Tunisia, the torture of Khaled Said in Egypt, and the arrest of the political activist, Fathi Terbel in Libya” are widely cited as key factors that led to Arab Spring.<sup>412</sup>

Tunisia’s Ennahda Movement and the Egyptian MB took advantage of these structural factors and capitalized on the regional momentum set in motion by Bouazizi’s self-immolation. Having suffered brutal repression and near total exclusion from Tunisia’s political process for decades, the Ennahda Movement attracted sympathetic voters and seized the rare opportunity to engage in the electoral process in 2011.<sup>413</sup> The Brotherhood, a longtime foe of the repressive and corrupt government of Husni Mubarak, used the political opening to re-enter public life and mobilize well-organized networks that had previously been forced to operate at a minimum for fear of arrest and torture.<sup>414</sup> The successes of these two elections can be attributed to the overly rigid and calcified nature of the previous regimes, and as Ihsan Milmaz and Galib Bashirov noted, the “pragmatic decision mak[ing]” of Islamists “who are willing to exchange theological ideals for political gains.”<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> Kamal Eldin Osman Salih, “The Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 188.

<sup>412</sup> Salih, “The Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings,” 188; Ahmad, “The Enduring ‘Arab Spring,’” 94.

<sup>413</sup> Rory McCarthy, “When Islamists Lose: The Politicization of Tunisia’s Ennahda Movement,” *Middle East Journal* 72, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 369-370, 374.

<sup>414</sup> Khalil al-Anani, “Upended Path: The Rise and Fall of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” *Middle East Journal* 69, no. 4 (Autumn 2015): 529-530.

<sup>415</sup> Ihsan Yilmaz and Galib Bashirov, “The AKP After 15 Years: Emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey,” *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 9 (2018): 1822.

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*The Failure of Political Islamism's Two Strongest Movements*

Despite the rapid initial success of both the Ennahda Movement and the MB, both Islamist political groups faced complex challenges once in power of their respective country's governments. The same could be said of the initial success of Islamists in securing military control of significant parts of Libya, taking the lead among the Syrian opposition in and around Aleppo, and dominating the cabinet of Yemeni President Abd-Rabbo Mansour Hadi after the start of the 2015 war in Yemen. The royal families in the Gulf witnessing these attempted power transitions sought opportunities to exploit some of those challenges that the political Islamist groups faced. Ultimately, it was the poor governing decisions these Islamist groups made that led to their waning influence (for the Ennahda Movement in Tunisia), rapid demise (for the MB in Egypt), or gradual military retreat (in Syria and Yemen). In the context of this cold war, the authoritarian regimes in the Gulf almost certainly noted the successes and mishaps of these movements and factored those observations into their own security strategies to weaken all sorts of political Islamic movements in the future. Additionally, the suppression of these movements following their seemingly inept governance diminished the domestic public appeal of supporting such movements in the future.

*Ennahda's Uncertain Future in Tunisia*

The Ennahda Movement's contribution in ousting Tunisia's repressive former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was nothing short of remarkable. Ben Ali's rule faced little opposition until 2010, but like most authoritarian rulers, Ben Ali did not tolerate political protest and he was widely viewed by Tunisians as corrupt.<sup>416</sup> Ennahda first felt the true wrath of Ben Ali after the un-formally recognized Islamist group won 14.5 percent of the votes in the April 1989 election. Ben Ali imprisoned thousands of Ennahda members, pushed some into exile, and fired many of the group's followers from public sector jobs as retaliation.<sup>417</sup> The harsh crackdown on Ennahda

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<sup>416</sup> "Obituary: Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali," *BBC News*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12196679>.

<sup>417</sup> McCarthy, "When Islamists Lose," 372.

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Movement members (or the Islamic Tendency Movement as it was known prior to 1989) caused the group to be divided ideologically. One wing emerged from Ben Ali's repressive measures with a commitment to political pragmatism at the expense of Islamist ideals. The other wing emerged feeling that Ennahda leadership already prioritized political goals above the groups "original project of promoting morality and correct behavior," and that political ambition "damaged the Islamist subculture" as Oxford Fellow Rory McCarthy argued.<sup>418</sup>

Different from most other Islamist political groups including the MB, Ennahda tamed its Islamist activism and vision early on to increase its chances of political survival.<sup>419</sup> Perhaps the clearest indicator of Ennahda's transition away from Islamism and towards its self-identified label as "Muslim Democrats" was its two-fold capitulation to secularist parties in drafting Tunisia's 2014 constitution.<sup>420</sup> Though internal divisions arose between Ennahda's Islamist hardliners and its westernized members, the party ultimately voted to reject *sharia* as the foundation for legal authority and upheld the constitutional right to freedom of conscience (permitting atheism).<sup>421</sup> Ennahda was an active political force from 2011-2014 during the first coalition and remained an important member of the coalition government since 2015. However, the future of the political party is difficult to ascertain owing to the unpredictability of Tunisia's current president, Kais Saied.

The relatively successful transition to democracy in Tunisia—and political Islam's place in it—is now in jeopardy over increasing concerns that Tunisian president Kais Saied plans to revert Tunisia to an authoritarian state. In his announced plans for a "new republic" in May 2022, President Saied notably excluded many political parties including Ennahda from his committee in charge of drafting a new constitution.<sup>422</sup> This announcement came nearly a year after

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<sup>418</sup> McCarthy, "When Islamists Lose," 373-374.

<sup>419</sup> McCarthy, "When Islamists Lose," 371.

<sup>420</sup> Sharan Grewal, "From Islamists to Muslim Democrats: The Case of Tunisia's Ennahda," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020): 519, 523.

<sup>421</sup> Grewal, "From Islamists to Muslim Democrats," 523.

<sup>422</sup> Hanen Jebli, "Tunisia's President to Establish 'New Republic' Amid Fears of New Dictatorship," *Al-Monitor*, May 13, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/tunisias-president-establish-new-republic-amid-fear-new-dictatorship>.

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economic, social, and civil unrest, as well as political infighting, prompted President Saied to dismiss Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and suspend parliament for 30 days.<sup>423</sup> Saied ultimately dissolved parliament in March 2022 after its members “voted to repeal measures that Saied used to seize power.”<sup>424</sup> Rachid Ghannouchi, longtime leader of Ennahda and speaker of parliament prior to its dissolution, said that he and Ennahda rejected plans for a new constitution and will advocate for the restoration of the existing parliament instead of hosting new elections in December 2022.<sup>425</sup>

Saied’s elimination of parliament, rule by decree, replacement of the judicial council, appointment of the electoral commission head, and exclusion of political opponents from his constitution re-writing process is reversing the democratic progress in Tunisia and dragging the country into political and economic crisis.<sup>426</sup> The resulting upheaval and protests in the Arab streets of Tunisia are eerily reminiscent of the protests that shook the country over a decade ago under another dictator.<sup>427</sup> Ennahda’s fate in Saied’s proposed “new republic” is uncertain, but the palpable enmity between the Tunisian president and the increasingly unpopular Muslim Democratic party points to Ennahda’s subjugation, if not repression under a new government. However, a new coalition of five parties (including Ennahda) announced an alliance known as the National Salvation Front, in opposition to President Saied and his policies, showing that the

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<sup>423</sup> Claire Parker, “Tunisia’s President Fires Prime Minister, Dismisses Government, Freezes Parliament,” *Washington Post*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/07/25/tunisia-saied-mechichi-parliament/>.

<sup>424</sup> Claire Parker, “Tunisian President Dissolves Parliament, Escalating Political Crisis,” *Washington Post*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/31/tunisia-president-dissolution-parliament-political-crisis/>.

<sup>425</sup> Parker, “Tunisian President Dissolves Parliament, Escalating Political Crisis,” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/31/tunisia-president-dissolution-parliament-political-crisis/>.

<sup>426</sup> “Tunisian Opposition Announces Alliance Against President Saied,” *Al-Arabiya*, April 26, 2022, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/north-africa/2022/04/26/Tunisian-opposition-announces-alliance-against-President-Saied>; “Tunisia President Decrees He Will Name Electoral Chief,” *Al-Arabiya*, April 22, 2022, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/north-africa/2022/04/22/Tunisia-president-decrees-he-will-name-electoral-chief>.

<sup>427</sup> Tarek Amara, “Thousands in Tunisia Protest Against President, Demand Democratic Return,” *Reuters*, May 15, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/thousands-tunisia-protest-against-president-demand-democratic-return-2022-05-15/>.

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Muslim democrats may yet have some allies and political clout.<sup>428</sup> Turkey and the UAE are no doubt also watching the events in Tunisia unfold and may once again pick opposing sides in a civil war. The civil war scenario will be discussed at a later point.

*The Muslim Brotherhood's Abrupt End*

Carnegie scholar Ashraf El-Sherif identified many political, ideological, and organizational failures of the Egyptian MB that he argued led to the group's swift takeover of the Egyptian state in 2013. Politically, the MB leadership were overly anxious to consolidate their power over the old state and its secular institutions. The MB alienated other political movements and held only transactional relationships with other political factions, failed to compromise with secular elites, and ultimately lost its Islamist support base due to frustrations with the Brotherhood's inability to resolve economic and social crises.<sup>429</sup> Ideologically, Ashraf El-Sharif argued that the MB struggled to "fashion itself as an Egyptian version of the Iranian Khomeinists," or as a "Muslim version of European Christian democratic parties."<sup>430</sup> Organizationally, the MB's centralized decision-making, victimhood or conspiratorial mindset, disconnectedness with the wide ranging needs of its followers, and failure to prioritize and expand most of its own social welfare programs, created deep resentment and distrust towards the MB.<sup>431</sup>

In many ways, the Brotherhood employed the same exclusionary political measures that led to Mubarak's removal. Power politics frustrated MB voters and it appears that the MB itself struggled to confront the issue of Islam's compatibility with democracy head on, once the group wielded governing authority. The organization sacrificed many of its core Islamist beliefs for

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<sup>428</sup> Tunisian Opposition Announces Alliance Against President Saied," <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/north-africa/2022/04/26/Tunisian-opposition-announces-alliance-against-President-Saied>.

<sup>429</sup> Ashraf El-Sharif, *The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Failures* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), 4-11, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/muslim\\_brotherhood\\_failures.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/muslim_brotherhood_failures.pdf).

<sup>430</sup> El-Sharif, *The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Failures*, 12-13.

<sup>431</sup> El-Sharif, *The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Failures*, 20-21.

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short-term political gains, reigniting some of the revolutionary fervor that brought the MB to power in the first place. Instead of addressing economic and social issues, President Morsi's brief tenure as president was a conquest to eradicate Egypt's perceived "deep state."<sup>432</sup> These chaotic conditions and the MB's gross miscalculation of the old state's power—Egypt's military power in particular—presented an opportunity for the Gulf monarchies to reverse the results of the democratic takeover in Egypt via an orchestrated coup in 2013.

*Political Islam's Tie to Terrorism*

The MB's and Ennahda's poor governance weakened the appeal of political Islamist movements and may have inadvertently strengthened *Salafi-jihadism*. Monica Marks at the University of Oxford, after interviewing Ennahda leaders between 2011-2013, found that Ennahda members held mostly negative views of the MB and felt that the MB's poor governance hurt political Islamists' claim that Islam and democracy are compatible.<sup>433</sup> In Tunisia, young *Salafi-jihadis* felt the core issues of Islam in society were being neglected by Ennahda's "slow" approach to religious, social, and political reform, and they consequently organized as Ansar al-Sharia.<sup>434</sup> In 2012, the terrorist group attacked the American Embassy in Tunis and orchestrated two political assassinations in 2013.<sup>435</sup> Terrorist acts and poor governance by erstwhile Ennahda and MB members strengthened the Gulf monarchies' claims that all MB-affiliated Islamic groups were terrorists and caused instability.

*The Saudi and UAE Disconnect with Islamists*

Islamists' relationship with the Saudi regime is more nuanced than with other Arab monarchies. Many Wahhabi religious practices coincide with an ideal Islamic state, such as

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<sup>432</sup> Boubaker Boukreisa, "The Arab World: Protests, Revolutions, and Choices," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 14, no. 4 (2021): 11.

<sup>433</sup> Monica Marks, "Tunisia's Ennahda: Rethinking Islamism in the Context of ISIS and the Egyptian Coup," *Brookings*, August 2015, 3, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/rethinking-political-islam/>.

<sup>434</sup> Marks, "Tunisia's Ennahda," 6.

<sup>435</sup> Marks, "Tunisia's Ennahda," 6.

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“public enforcement of morality, dress codes, the closure of shops during prayer times, gender separation, the collection of zakat, Daawa at home and abroad, and the role of sharia in jurisprudence” according to Carnegie scholar Toby Matthiesen.<sup>436</sup> Saudi Arabia also has a history of tolerating Islamists’ teachings. Decades before the Arab Spring, exiled leaders of the Egyptian and Syrian MB fled to Saudi Arabia and stood up Saudi educational and religious institutions.<sup>437</sup>

The Saudi monarchy’s relatively positive relationship with Islamists soured, however, when Saudi “*Sahwa*” opposition clerics in the 1990s publicly criticized the royal family for permitting Western powers into the country to fight Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War.<sup>438</sup> These criticisms no doubt re-surfaced troubling memories of the denouncement of the House of Saud in 1979 by a group of Messianic Islamist preachers and the subsequent seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Matthiesen contended that Saudi Islamists’ criticisms of Riyadh’s handling of the Gulf War shifted the monarchy’s view of Islamists groups and especially its foreign policy towards political Islamic movements.<sup>439</sup> King Abdullah feared for his own political (and perhaps physical) security following the ousting of Egyptian dictator and strategic partner Hosni Mubarak at the hands of the MB.<sup>440</sup>

Unlike the absolute monarchies of Saudi Arabia or Qatar, the UAE is a federation of monarchies with unequal distribution of influence and wealth.<sup>441</sup> Abu Dhabi is by far the richest Emirate and has attempted to consolidate its power over the other Emirates since the country’s independence in 1971. *Islah*, an offshoot of the MB operating in the Arab Gulf states and

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<sup>436</sup> Toby Matthiesen, “The Domestic Sources of Saudi Foreign Policy: Islamists and the State in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings,” *Brookings*, August 2015, 2, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Saudi-Arabia\\_Matthiesen-FINALE.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Saudi-Arabia_Matthiesen-FINALE.pdf).

<sup>437</sup> Matthiesen, “The Domestic Sources of Saudi Foreign Policy,” 4. See also, “The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 1, 2012, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/02/01/muslim-brotherhood-in-syria>.

<sup>438</sup> Matthiesen, “The Domestic Sources of Saudi Foreign Policy,” 4.

<sup>439</sup> Matthiesen, “The Domestic Sources of Saudi Foreign Policy,” 4.

<sup>440</sup> Ahmad, “The Enduring ‘Arab Spring’,” 96.

<sup>441</sup> Roberts, “Qatar and the UAE,” 551.

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Yemen, garnered substantial support and membership in the northern, poorer Emirates of Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah throughout the 1970s, where Islah “obtained federal ministerial positions in education, labor and social affairs, justice, Islamic affairs, and *awqaf* (religious endowments).”<sup>442</sup> Shaykh Zayid bin Sultan al Nahyan came to view Islah as a domestic threat due to Islah’s calls for social and political change, the failed 1995 assassination attempt on Egyptian president Husni Mubarak by Islamic extremists, and the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center which involved two Emiratis.<sup>443</sup> All MB affiliates were therefore declared terrorists and deported from the country. Where Abu Dhabi viewed Islah as a domestic threat to its primacy within the federation of Emirates, Qatar faced no such threat and considered MB-affiliated groups as allies, as will be shown in the next section.<sup>444</sup>

The Arab Spring illustrated the proactive steps some Islamist groups took to make meaningful political, social, and (in Egypt’s case) religious reform in their respective countries. The uprisings also showed the reactionary measures taken by the Gulf monarchies against these movements. Though they were too late to stop the ousting of the autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt, the royal families in the Gulf flocked to the remaining battle zones in Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen where they sent financial, material, and military aid to preserve the old social order as much as possible. This effort by the monarchies to contain political Islamism continues 10 years after the initial protests began and is likely to persist in the 10 years to come. Only now, the autocracies have over a decade of experience confronting Islamists that engage in the political process. The greatest hinderance to the monarchies’ attempt to entrench MENA in authoritarianism are the powerful state-sponsors of political Islamism: Turkey and Qatar.

### **State Sponsorship of Islamist Movements**

Turkey’s and Qatar’s historic and current support of political Islamist movements remains the core friction point between these two countries and the Gulf monarchies and impedes the peace processes in Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and

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<sup>442</sup> Roberts, “Qatar and the UAE,” 552.

<sup>443</sup> Roberts, “Qatar and the UAE,” 553.

<sup>444</sup> Roberts, “Qatar and the UAE,” 550.

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Bahrain emerged from the uprisings as a relatively united bloc in opposition to the MB and Iran.<sup>445</sup> Turkey's and Qatar's relationships with the MB (and loosely with Iran) thus contradicted the regional and domestic security interests of the monarchical regimes of the quartet. Former Turkish prime minister and current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, saw the uprisings as an opportunity to flaunt Turkey's secular model of democratic Islam, strengthen his domestic base, and increase Turkey's bid for regional leadership.<sup>446</sup> Qatari Emir Hamad bin Khalifa viewed Islamist movements as credible actors in society riding a wave of public support for change, and he wanted his country to be seen at the forefront of backing that new regional political order. Doha's decision to distinguish itself as a special status patron of the Islamists, most notably through the positive coverage of Qatari satellite news channel Al Jazeera, established a deep wedge between Qatar and the Gulf monarchies as a result.<sup>447</sup>

Throughout the Arab Spring, Ankara's and Doha's foreign policies tended to align, building on a long-standing personal friendship between Erdoğan and Hamad bin Khalifa, and strengthening their countries' bilateral relationship over time. Turkey-based scholar Dr. Nur Çetinoğlu Harunoğlu argued that the civil war in Syria was the initial driver to foster the Turkish-Qatari alliance. She wrote in 2016:

Once the difference between the priorities of Turkey and the GCC became visible [in Syria], Doha emerged as a potential partner for Ankara. Once Doha became headquarters of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which succeed the [Syrian National Council] in Turkey, Qatar became, in effect, the second shelter of the Syrian opposition. Since 2012, a surprising degree of alignment emerged between Turkey and Qatar, since the latter holds strong ties with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood as well.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> Burhanettin Duran, "A Decade Later: Taking Stock of the Arab Uprisings and Turkey's Role," *Insight Turkey* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 214.

<sup>446</sup> Asli Aydintaşbaş and Cinzia Bianco, "Useful Enemies: How the Turkey-UAE Rivalry is Remaking the Middle East," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, March 2021, 2, <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Useful-enemies-How-the-Turkey-UAE-rivalry-is-remaking-the-Middle-East.pdf>.

<sup>447</sup> Nur Çetinoğlu Harunoğlu, "Turkey's Intensifying Partnership with Qatar and its Implications for Turkish-American Relations," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 20, no. 3 (Winter 2016): 3. See also Roy Miller and Harry Verhoeven, "Overcoming Smallness: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Strategic Realignment in the Gulf," *International Politics* 57 (2020): 3.

<sup>448</sup> Harunoğlu, "Turkey's Intensifying Partnership with Qatar," 4.

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From their early alignment in 2012, Turkey and Qatar went on to back Morsi's government in Egypt until 2013, establish a Turkish military base in Qatar in 2015, and continue to back the interim government in the Libyan capital, all to the frustration of the Gulf monarchies.

*Turkey: Drawing the Ire of the Quartet*

The AKP, championed by President Erdoğan, embodies nearly everything the quartet monarchies fear and despise. The AKP is an Islamist party sympathetic to the MB and is overtly keen on establishing democratically-elected, Turkish-allied governments throughout the MENA region.<sup>449</sup> Similar to the threat posed by Iran's new Islamist democracy in 1979, Turkey perceived the Arab uprisings as a cry for democracy and asserted its Islamic democratic model as the answer to Arab grievance in corrupt authoritarian states.<sup>450</sup> As the only country in the region successfully governed by an Islamist party, "Turkey became a safe-haven for Arab dissidents who opposed the new authoritarian regimes that emerged out of the crackdown on the Arab revolts by the status quo powers."<sup>451</sup> For the quartet, this so-called safe-haven equated to harboring terrorists and served as the backdrop for antagonistic relations between Turkey and the authoritarian regimes of the Gulf.<sup>452</sup> For Turkey, providing safe-haven for "Muslims fleeing persecution is a constitutive part of Turkey's national identity and founding as a modern nation-state" according to Turkey-based scholar Dr. Sener Akturk.<sup>453</sup>

*Turkey's Support for the Brotherhood and Ennahda*

Both the Ennahda Movement and the Egyptian MB aspired to mirror Turkey's Islamist political model or adapt it to their respective political environments. McCarthy argued that after

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<sup>449</sup> Aydıntaşbaş and Bianco, "Useful Enemies," 4.

<sup>450</sup> Harunoğlu, "Turkey's Intensifying Partnership with Qatar," 2.

<sup>451</sup> Aydıntaşbaş and Bianco, "Useful Enemies," 4; Burhanettin Duran, "A Decade Later," 229.

<sup>452</sup> "Turkey Still Opposes Egypt Labeling Muslim Brotherhood 'Terrorists'," *Middle East Eye*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-egypt-muslim-brotherhood-terrorist-label-cavusoglu>.

<sup>453</sup> Sener Akturk, "Turkey's Grand Strategy as the Third Power: A Realist Proposal," *Perceptions* 25, no. 2 (Winter 2020): 11.

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2011 and especially after the 2013 coup in Egypt, Ennahda leadership felt their future political relevance hinged on adopting a similar “vote-seeking center-right platform” to the AKP’s, leaving their Islamist roots behind.<sup>454</sup> The MB was interested in “consolidat[ing] its power through a series of international arrangements and domestic economic achievements based on a flexible combination of Islamist ideology, conservative culture, and economic liberalism,” the same way it perceived President Erdoğan and the AKP operated in Turkey.<sup>455</sup>

President Erdoğan and his party were unsure how to react to the Arab uprisings at first.<sup>456</sup> Carnegie scholar Henri Barkey wrote in 2011 that Turkey’s “zero-problems” policy explains Ankara’s initial silence on both movements in Tunisia and Egypt, and that Erdoğan only became vocal of his support for ousting Mubarak once it was clear that regime change was inevitable in Egypt.<sup>457</sup> Once Ennahda and the MB won their country’s first free and fair elections, Turkey capitalized on both party’s admiration of the Turkish Islamic-democratic model by forging close relationships with party leadership and expanding economic opportunities.<sup>458</sup> Turkey’s real support for the MB came after the 2013 coup, when it received potentially tens of thousands of exiled MB members and allowed the organization’s leadership to operate the movement from the diaspora.<sup>459</sup>

Erdoğan and the AKP viewed the 2013 coup in Egypt as a coordinated effort by the quartet to diminish Turkey’s influence in the region.<sup>460</sup> Following Sisi’s takeover, Erdoğan publicly labeled Sisi as an “illegal tyrant,” called on the UN Security Council to impose

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<sup>454</sup> McCarthy, “When Islamists Lose,” 370-371, 382.

<sup>455</sup> El-Sherif, *The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s Failures*, 7.

<sup>456</sup> Henri Barkey, “Turkey and the Arab Spring,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 26, 2011, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/04/26/turkey-and-arab-spring-pub-43731>.

<sup>457</sup> Barkey, “Turkey and the Arab Spring,” <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/04/26/turkey-and-arab-spring-pub-43731>.

<sup>458</sup> Abdelrahman Ayyash, “The Turkish Future of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” *The Century Foundation*, August 17, 2020, <https://tcf.org/content/report/turkish-future-egypts-muslim-brotherhood/?session=1>.

<sup>459</sup> Ayyash, ““The Turkish Future of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” <https://tcf.org/content/report/turkish-future-egypts-muslim-brotherhood/?session=1>.

<sup>460</sup> Aydıntaşbaş and Bianco, “Useful Enemies,” 7.

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sanctions on the new dictator, demanded the release of former president Morsi, and condemned the crackdown on the MB.<sup>461</sup> Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program for the Washington Institute in 2013, argued that Erdoğan's unflinching support for the MB even after the 2013 coup, was rooted in Erdoğan's empathy for the Islamist group, and his fear that Turkey's military may one day follow Egypt's example.<sup>462</sup> Even after Morsi's unexpected death in 2019, Erdoğan described Morsi as "a 'martyr' and blamed Egypt's 'tyrants' for his death, adding that he doesn't believe that Morsi died of natural causes," Al Jazeera reported.<sup>463</sup> Relations between Sisi and Erdoğan have not improved much since then.

Ennahda's political success in Tunisia's transition from authoritarianism to democracy has not required Turkey to engage directly in Tunisian politics for the larger part of a decade. However, the current political and economic crisis in Tunisia under President Saied could pit Turkey and the UAE against each other in a future civil war. Asli Aydintaşbaş and Cinzia Bianco wrote for the *European Council on Foreign Relations* that, since 2013, Abu Dhabi has actively "tried to co-opt the Tunisian government, including its Islamist elements, in the hope of persuading it to maintain a healthy distance from Ankara."<sup>464</sup> For its part, the only real soft power Ankara has left in Tunisia is tied directly to the fate of the Ennahda party. If Saied successfully ostracizes Ennahda from his proposed "new republic," President Erdoğan's and AKP's relationship with Tunisia may start to resemble Turkey's unresolved, tense relationship with Egypt.<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>461</sup> Maged Atef, "Turkish-Egyptian Relations After Erdogan's Sacrifice of the Muslim Brotherhood," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkish-egyptian-relations-after-erdogans-sacrifice-muslim-brotherhood>; "Egypt Expels Turkish Ambassador," *BBC News*, November 23, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25066115>.

<sup>462</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "Erdogan's Empathy for Morsi," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 14, 2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erdogans-empathy-morsi>.

<sup>463</sup> "Turkey: Erdogan Slams Egypt's 'Tyrants' as Thousands Mourn Morsi," *Al-Jazeera*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/18/turkey-erdogan-slams-egypts-tyrants-as-thousands-mourn-morsi>.

<sup>464</sup> Aydintaşbaş and Bianco, "Useful Enemies," 7.

<sup>465</sup> Fehim Tastekin, "Erdogan Plays to Base with Criticism of Tunisia," *Al-Monitor*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/erdogan-plays-base-criticism-tunisia>.

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Ankara and Abu Dhabi have already expressed their opposing views on the Tunisian debacle. Anwar Gargash, diplomatic advisor to the UAE government, said in August 2021 after the Tunisian parliament was first suspended, “We support the Tunisian state and president in this positive agenda.”<sup>466</sup> Conversely, Ibrahim Kalin, an advisor to Erdoğan tweeted, “We reject the suspension of the democratic process and disregard of the democratic will of the people in friendly and brotherly Tunisia. ... We condemn initiatives that lack constitutional legitimacy and popular support.”<sup>467</sup> When the Tunisian parliament was dissolved, President Erdoğan himself publicly stated, “We see the developments in Tunisia as the smearing of democracy. The dissolution of a parliament of elected representatives is ... a blow to the will of the Tunisian people.”<sup>468</sup>

Tunisia for nearly a decade was the black eye for the quartet monarchies, as it appeared to be the success story for Islamic political movements and for democracy in an Arab state. Abu Dhabi will likely spare no expense to reverse those outcomes in Tunisia while degrading Turkey’s regional influence as a bonus. Erdoğan is unlikely to abandon Ennahda nor his interests in Tunisia, as doing so would add one more quartet-backed regime committed to isolating him and the AKP in MENA. The evidence for Erdoğan’s unwillingness to capitulate to the Arab monarchies is most clearly seen in the battle for Libya.

*The Battle for Libya*

The civil war in Libya has become the chief battleground between Turkey and the monarchies, and the UAE in particular.<sup>469</sup> Turkey supported the Brotherhood-influenced and UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in opposition to the UAE- and Egypt-backed House of Representatives (HOR) led by the Qaddafi-era general, Khalifa Haftar and his

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<sup>466</sup> “UAE Says it Supports Tunisian President's Decisions,” *Reuters*, August 7, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/tunisia-politicis-emirates-idAFL8N2PE0PD>.

<sup>467</sup> Parker, “Tunisia’s President Fires Prime Minister, Dismisses Government, Freezes Parliament,” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/07/25/tunisia-saied-mechichi-parliament/>.

<sup>468</sup> Tastekin, “Erdogan Plays to Base with Criticism of Tunisia,” <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/erdogan-plays-base-criticism-tunisia>.

<sup>469</sup> Aydıntaşbaş and Bianco, “Useful Enemies,” 10.

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forces.<sup>470</sup> The successful 2013 military coup in Egypt provided the UAE precedent for backing experienced warlords in Libya, but those efforts ultimately failed with Haftar's 2020 defeat in Tripoli.<sup>471</sup> The now-defunct GNA was replaced by the Government of National Unity (GNU) in 2021 to pave way for elections set for December 2021. Those elections were postponed indefinitely due to Libya's flawed election framework.<sup>472</sup> HOR Speaker Aquilah Saleh, Haftar, and their regional backers (UAE, Egypt, and France) continue to challenge the GNU interim government and seek greater influence "over constitutional and electoral processes."<sup>473</sup>

Abu Dhabi's slow failure to establish a strong-man regime in Libya could have significant consequences for the Gulf monarchies. Qatar-based scholar Ali Bakir summarized the UAE zero-sum game in Libya this way:

Abu Dhabi cannot afford the idea that Libya becomes an example of national reconciliation and peaceful power transition in the region as this will have direct impact on Libya's neighbors including Egypt, the ultimate spearhead of UAE since the 2013 military coup. Moreover Abu Dhabi cannot tolerate political parties representing all walks of life participate in elections and reach to power because this undermines its narrative about radicalism and the need for a military dictator 'strong man' to rule. UAE's zero-sum game in Libya means that Abu Dhabi's failure to achieve its goals in the oil-rich North African country will pave the way to the rival camp (Turkey and Qatar) to exert greater influence both on geopolitical and geo-economic levels in Libya and beyond.<sup>474</sup>

Bakir refutes the popular notion that Abu Dhabi's motives in Libya (or anywhere else in the region) are primarily anti-Islamist. While the Emiratis claim to be neutralizing the MB or political Islamist threat, Bakir argued that Abu Dhabi is more fearful of democracy in general.<sup>475</sup>

Governing models aside, Turkey and the UAE covet Libya's maritime jurisdiction, oil,

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<sup>470</sup> Ahmad, "The Enduring 'Arab Spring'," 100.

<sup>471</sup> Ali Bakir, "The UAE's Disruptive Policy in Libya," *Insight Turkey* 22, no. 4 (2020): 162, 165.

<sup>472</sup> Omar Hammady, "What Went Wrong With Libya's Failed Elections," *Foreign Policy*, February 18, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/18/libya-elections-2021-postponed/>.

<sup>473</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Libya and U.S. Policy (IF11556)," prepared by Christopher M. Blanchard, April 15, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11556>.

<sup>474</sup> Bakir, "The UAE's Disruptive Policy in Libya," 173.

<sup>475</sup> Bakir, "The UAE's Disruptive Policy in Libya," 162.

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and proximity to the natural gas fields off the coast of Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece.<sup>476</sup> If Haftar's forces had successfully taken Tripoli in 2019-2020, Turkey's influence in the Mediterranean would have shrunk, and Turkey would have found itself surrounded by unfriendly governments in the Mediterranean (Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, and Libya). Turkey sought to reap the benefits of Libya's maritime boundaries in 2019 via two Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) with the GNA, but Egypt and Greece's demarcation agreement in 2020 sidelined the effort.<sup>477</sup> Unexpectedly, MbZ visited Ankara in November 2021, and Erdoğan followed suit by visiting Abu Dhabi in an apparent thaw of tensions between Turkey and the UAE.<sup>478</sup> But as Ben Fishman, Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute noted, these visits are likely driven by Turkey's economic needs and UAE cutting some of its losses.<sup>479</sup> If the two regional powers agree to cooperate, it could point towards greater stability in Libya in the next decade.

*Towards Rapprochement and the Future of Turkish-Quartet Relations*

In recent years, Erdoğan and the AKP sought reconciliation with some of the remaining Arab monarchies, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, with mixed success. The conditions for Turkish normalization with the quartet regimes are principally the same as the demands made of Qatar during the 2017-2021 blockade: renounce support of the MB and withdraw forces from contested Arab states (especially Libya).<sup>480</sup> Erdoğan has taken a few steps in line with these demands.

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<sup>476</sup> Aydıntaşbaş and Bianco, "Useful Enemies," 10; Bakir, "The UAE's Disruptive Policy in Libya," 163.

<sup>477</sup> Bakir, "The UAE's Disruptive Policy in Libya," 170; Mohamed Saied, "Egypt Supports Cyprus Against Turkey," *Al-Monitor*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/egypt-supports-cyprus-against-turkey>.

<sup>478</sup> Suzan Fraser, "Turkey, UAE Sign Cooperation Agreements as They Mend Ties," *ABC News*, November 24, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/turkey-hosts-emirati-crown-prince-see-mend-ties-81367002>.

<sup>479</sup> Ben Fishman, "Can Turkey and the UAE Help Break Libya's Deadlock?," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/can-turkey-and-uae-help-break-libyas-deadlock>.

<sup>480</sup> Fehim Tastekin, "Turkey Faces Rough Road to Normalization with Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/turkey-faces-rough-road-normalization-egypt>.

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Some of those steps included instructing the MB's Istanbul-based TV network to tame its negative coverage of Cairo and ceding the trials of 26 Saudi nationals allegedly involved in the 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi to Riyadh.<sup>481</sup> Sisi has made clear that Turkey must completely break off all ties with the MB and its affiliates and leave Libya if it hopes to restore ties with Egypt.<sup>482</sup> President Erdoğan also paid a visit to Jeddah in April 2022 where he embraced MbS in a symbolic gesture of good relations.<sup>483</sup> More on MbS' and Erdoğan's reconciliation will be explored in chapter five.

Erdoğan and the AKP are unlikely to completely forsake the MB or similar organizations like Hamas while Turkey is attempting to break out of its regional and even international isolation.<sup>484</sup> Ankara's support for the MB and political Islamists during the Arab Spring, its military base in Qatar, and aid to Qatar during the 2017-2021 blockade made Turkey an enemy of the quartet monarchies but strengthened its ties with Doha. With Qatar slowly thawing its ties with the Gulf, Turkey is left with only pockets of MB allies spread throughout MENA to keep Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman vision alive.<sup>485</sup> Forsaking the MB would likely cause problems for Erdoğan domestically as well, as many of the Brotherhood's exiles fled to Turkey in the crackdowns after the Arab Spring.<sup>486</sup> Turkey's economic crisis, upcoming presidential elections in 2023, and the regional instability caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine might, however,

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<sup>481</sup> Tastekin, "Erdoğan Plays to Base with Criticism of Tunisia," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/erdogan-plays-base-criticism-tunisia>.

<sup>482</sup> Fehim Tastekin, "Can Ankara-Riyadh Rapprochement Help Improve Turkey-Egypt Ties?," *Al-Monitor*, May 7, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/can-ankara-riyadh-rapprochement-help-improve-turkey-egypt-ties>.

<sup>483</sup> Tastekin, "Can Ankara-Riyadh Rapprochement Help Improve Turkey-Egypt Ties?," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/can-ankara-riyadh-rapprochement-help-improve-turkey-egypt-ties>.

<sup>484</sup> Pinar Tremblay, "Turkey Not Ready to Give Up on Muslim Brotherhood," *Al-Monitor*, December 12, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/turkey-not-yet-ready-give-muslim-brotherhood>.

<sup>485</sup> Abigail Ng, "Saudi Arabia and its Allies Restore Diplomatic Ties with Qatar After Three-year Rift," *CNBC News*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/05/saudi-arabia-restores-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar-after-three-year-rift.html>.

<sup>486</sup> Tremblay, "Turkey Not Ready to Give Up on Muslim Brotherhood," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/turkey-not-yet-ready-give-muslim-brotherhood>.

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constrain President Erdoğan to consider taking additional reconciliatory steps with the Gulf in the near-future.

*The Small-State Rivalry: Qatar vs. UAE*

Qatar and the UAE share many of the same regional and international pressures but have adopted unique policies and brands of governance to differentiate themselves from each other.<sup>487</sup> Surrounded by three comparatively massive countries (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran) with rivalries of their own, Qatar and the UAE individually pursue militaristic and economic security guarantees by expanding their regional and international connections.<sup>488</sup> For Doha, this included hosting U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) from the time of the 2003 Iraq invasion, giving Turkey military access in 2015, and hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2022.<sup>489</sup> The UAE prioritizes tourism and trade, but Abu Dhabi's normalization with Israel in 2020 also showed the UAE leadership's willingness to break with traditional allies in the Gulf to procure advanced weaponry from Israel and its Western allies. Perhaps the most important friction point between Qatar and UAE leadership, however, is their antithetical perceptions of political Islamism.

*Competing Islamist Visions*

Like Iran in the previous chapter, Qatar sought to expand its regional influence and improve its international standing during the Arab Spring by offering an alternative to Saudi-UAE hegemony in the Middle East.<sup>490</sup> Qatar pragmatically supported a dispersed network of impactful groups—many of them Islamists—over the course of decades in order to overcome its

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<sup>487</sup> David H. Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, and the Qatar-UAE Contest over the Arab Spring and the Gulf Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 9. See also David B. Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE," *Middle East Journal* 71, no. 4 (Autumn 2017): 549.

<sup>488</sup> Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 10.

<sup>489</sup> Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 9.

<sup>490</sup> Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 40.

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otherwise limited reach before, during, and after the uprisings.<sup>491</sup> Some of these Islamist groups included Hamas, Jabhat al Nusrah, the Houthis, and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>492</sup>

Qatar's historic relationships with the MB and other Islamist groups differ significantly from that of UAE. In the 1950s, Doha, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Riyadh, and Kuwait all capitalized on the influx of exiled MB members from Egypt and Palestinians from the Gaza Strip by allowing them refuge in exchange for assistance standing up their Departments of Education, Health, and Civil Service. Doha permitted the MB to proselytize with the understanding that the group was not to advocate changes in the state, while Abu Dhabi underwent successive crackdowns on MB preaching from the early 1980s to the mid-2000s.<sup>493</sup> Egypt-born and Azhar graduate Yusef al-Qaradawi was among the MB exiles to arrive in Qatar in 1961 and grew to become the most influential *‘ālim* (elite Muslim scholar) leading up to and throughout the Arab Spring.

Qaradawi's position as head of Qatar's Religious Institute, empowerment by the Al Thani royal family, and international reach through Qatar's Al Jazeera television network granted him Islamic authenticity and cemented his popularity during Egypt's 2011 protests.<sup>494</sup> David Warren, author of *Rivals in the Gulf*, documented four key techniques Qaradawi used in his daily *fatwas* (aired over Al Jazeera) to legitimize the 18 days of protests: "contesting key definitions, citing authoritative statements from the Qur'an and Sunna, expanding the remit of pre-existing Islamic legal concepts, and incorporating the language of human rights and citizenship into his arguments."<sup>495</sup> After the 2011 success in Egypt, Qaradawi proposed a "Jurisprudence of Revolution" that distinguished between "rebellion" (peaceful protest) and "armed rebellion," touted the complete compatibility between Islam and democracy, and sought to apply the new Egyptian model to other Arab countries. Once the Sunni-minority government of Bahrain encountered mass protests from the majority Shia population in early 2011, however, Qaradawi

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<sup>491</sup> David B. Roberts, "Reflecting on Qatar's 'Islamists' Soft Power," *Brookings*, April 4, 2019, 2, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FP\\_20190703\\_qatar\\_roberts.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FP_20190703_qatar_roberts.pdf).

<sup>492</sup> Roberts, "Reflecting on Qatar's 'Islamists' Soft Power," 3.

<sup>493</sup> Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE," 559.

<sup>494</sup> Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 34-35.

<sup>495</sup> Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 42.

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changed his rhetoric by calling on Sunni Arabs to defend against the threat to Bahrain's "Arab and Islamic nature."<sup>496</sup>

Conversely, MbZ took measures to confront Islamists by relying on Jeddah-based *'ālim*, and longtime friend of the Al Nahyan's, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, during the Arab Spring uprisings. Without an "institutional religious apparatus" of its own, Abu Dhabi could not counter claims made by Islamist groups that the old social contract between the ruler and the ruled may not be in harmony with Islamic teachings.<sup>497</sup> Bin Bayyah, though originally an associate of Qaradawi's, broke ties with the Qatar-based *ulama* in 2013, and the Al Nahyan royal family sponsored his "Jurisprudence of Peace" project. This project rivaled Qaradawi's in that Bin Bayyah asserted that state governments, instead of independent *ulama*, should become directly involved in the training of muftis to curb what Bin Bayyah called "the chaos of the *fatwah*."<sup>498</sup> Bin Bayyah's famous statement "it is said that behind every act of terrorism, there is a fatwa," resonated with the Abu Dhabi royal family who feared both the perceived domestic and regional threat the MB posed to their rule and national security interests.<sup>499</sup> By labelling the MB and its affiliates as terrorists, Qaradawi (who issued daily *fatwahs* in support of the revolution) and Qatar by extension were labelled as supporters of terrorism.

*Economic Rivalry in Egypt*

The UAE and Qatar invested their equally impressive financial capital into backing opposite sides of Morsi's government. After Mubarak's forced resignation, President Al Nahyan flooded Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) with cash hoping to "preserv[e] an element of continuity with the previous regime" and organized an anti-MB coalition with GCC and international partners.<sup>500</sup> Doha's seemingly unlimited economic support to Morsi's

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<sup>496</sup> Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 45, 50.

<sup>497</sup> Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE," 556.

<sup>498</sup> Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 82.

<sup>499</sup> Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 82.

<sup>500</sup> Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 83.

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government and its refusal to join the GCC coalition set the stage for the 2014 diplomatic withdrawals and 2017-2021 Gulf Crisis.<sup>501</sup>

Abu Dhabi and Doha continue to invest in Egypt's failing economy amid the Russia-Ukraine crisis and the residual effects of the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>502</sup> In April 2022, Abu Dhabi pumped \$1.8 billion into Egypt's stock market, buying shares of five major, publicly traded Egyptian companies in the e-commerce, shipping, banking, and agricultural sectors.<sup>503</sup> In late-March 2022, Doha similarly invested \$5 billion into Egypt's real estate and tourism industries reportedly under stipulations from Cairo that the Qataris would cease its "negative coverage of Egyptian affairs."<sup>504</sup> This agreement between Cairo and Doha marks the first major Qatari investment in Egyptian markets since the December 2017 boycott.<sup>505</sup> At the time of writing, there is no indication that Doha or Abu Dhabi have ulterior motives for their investments other than profit. However, it is likely that the UAE and Saudi Arabia (who donated another \$5 billion into Egypt's Central Bank in March 2022) concurrently have a vested interest in mitigating economic hardships in Egypt to protect Sisi's regime from demonstrators.

*The Gulf Crisis (2017-2021): A Façade*

The air, land, and sea blockade imposed on Qatar (2017-2021) by the quartet monarchies (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain) was intended to be the major punishment for Qatar's involvement in backing alleged terrorist organizations (the MB and other Islamists) during the Arab Spring. Among the thirteen demands made for lifting the blockade were to cut all diplomatic ties with Iran, shut down the Turkish military base within Qatar, sever all

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<sup>501</sup> Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 60, 83.

<sup>502</sup> "UAE Investments Boost Egyptian Economy," April 25, 2022, *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/uae-investments-boost-egyptian-economy>.

<sup>503</sup> "UAE Investments Boost Egyptian Economy," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/uae-investments-boost-egyptian-economy>.

<sup>504</sup> Ayah Aman, "Egypt Welcomes Return of Qatari Investments," April 21, 2022, *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/egypt-welcomes-return-qatari-investments>.

<sup>505</sup> Aman, "Egypt Welcomes Return of Qatari Investments," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/egypt-welcomes-return-qatari-investments>.

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relationships with “terrorist, sectarian and ideological organisations,” shut down its Al Jazeera network, and to “align Qatar’s military, political, social and economic policies with the other Gulf and Arab countries.”<sup>506</sup>

Renowned Middle East scholar James Dorsey and various Qatar-based scholars contend that the Saudi-UAE maximalist demands were mere obfuscation and that the embargo was instead intended to “usurp” or “hollow out” Qatar’s sovereignty.<sup>507</sup> The demands distracted the media and international community from deeper fears of the young Saudi and Emirati princes—alternative political models to their own. For example, Qatar-based scholar Farhan Chak remarked that the quartet labeled the MB as a terrorist organization because the Islamic movement offered an alternative to the status quo led by the Saudi-UAE hegemonic bloc.<sup>508</sup> Qatar instead emerged with a stronger independent economy and strengthened relationships with both Turkey and Iran.<sup>509</sup>

Despite the reconciliation of formal ties between Qatar and the Gulf monarchies following the reconciliation al-Ula Summit in January 2021, scholars are skeptical that the “Gulf Crisis” is truly resolved.<sup>510</sup> Dr. Samuel Ramani, tutor of politics and international relations at the University of Oxford, wrote for *Foreign Policy*:

Although the end of the Qatar blockade is a positive development, the Gulf crisis is far from over. The reconciliation at the GCC summit was triggered by fatigue from the blockade and by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s desire to rebrand his

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<sup>506</sup> “Arab States Issue 13 Demands to End Qatar-Gulf Crisis,” *Al-Jazeera*, July 12, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/7/12/arab-states-issue-13-demands-to-end-qatar-gulf-crisis>.

<sup>507</sup> James Dorsey, “The Gulf Crisis has Lessons for Vladimir Putin. Not all may Work in His Favour,” *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* (Blog), March 17, 2022, <https://www.jamesmdorsey.net/post/the-gulf-crisis-has-lessons-for-vladimir-putin-not-all-may-work-in-his-favour>; Farhan Mujahid Chak, “Deconstructing the Gulf Crisis: Post-Colonialism and Competing ‘Projects’ in the Middle East,” *Insight Turkey* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 165.

<sup>508</sup> Chak, “Deconstructing the Gulf Crisis,” 168.

<sup>509</sup> Nader Kabbani, “Order from Chaos: The Blockade on Qatar Helped Strengthen Its Economy, Paving the Way to Stronger Regional Integration,” *Brookings*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/19/the-blockade-on-qatar-helped-strengthen-its-economy-paving-the-way-to-stronger-regional-integration/>.

<sup>510</sup> Samuel Ramani, “The Qatar Blockade is Over, but the Gulf Crisis Lives On,” *Foreign Policy*, January 27, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/27/qatar-blockade-gcc-divisions-turkey-libya-palestine/>; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Has the GCC Crisis Been Resolved?,” *Al-Jazeera*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/1/6/the-gcc-after-al-ula>.

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tarnished image with the new U.S. administration. It occurred without any compromises from Qatar on its support for Islamist movements or any display of contrition from Saudi Arabia or the UAE for the blockade's destabilizing consequences for the Middle East. ... Mistrust between Qatar and the blockading states, an ongoing rivalry between the UAE and Qatar, sharp divergences in policy toward Iran and Turkey, and geostrategic contestation in Africa could reheat the Gulf crisis in the near future.<sup>511</sup>

Ramani's analysis pre-dates both the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Russia-Ukraine war that began in February 2022. These two events have strengthened GCC resolve to be united against threats to the Arab world and have forced the Gulf to move towards strategic neutrality.<sup>512</sup> However, Ramani importantly identified the unresolved ideological differences and competing projects between Qatar, the UAE, and their rulers. With MbZ now officially installed as the UAE's president, MbS and Sisi are likely to mirror the domestic and foreign policies that MbZ has used, and will use, to strengthen the authoritarian establishment in the Middle East.<sup>513</sup>

### **Monarchical Strategies to Demobilize Political Islamism Domestically**

In addition to implementing a blockade on Qatar, leveraging a cold war against Turkey (discussed more in-depth in chapter five), and bolstering Egypt's secular dictatorship, Saudi Arabia and the UAE combat Islamist movements in their home states. The uprisings demonstrated to these Arab monarchies that Islamic groups wield immense power and—under the right conditions—can overthrow their rulers. Neither the royal families of Saudi Arabia nor the UAE wanted to be next, so they enacted a multi-faceted anti-Islamist campaign domestically as well as regionally. Along with Egypt's president, they take a three-pronged approach to ensure their regime security: (1) repressing existing or emerging political Islamist groups, (2) mitigating

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<sup>511</sup> Ramani, "The Qatar Blockade is Over, but the Gulf Crisis Lives On," <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/27/qatar-blockade-gcc-divisions-turkey-libya-palestine/>.

<sup>512</sup> Medlir Mema, "US Afghan Withdrawal Triggers Talk of "Balancing," *Middle East Policy Council*, September 22, 2021, <https://mepc.org/commentary/us-afghan-withdrawal-triggers-talk-balancing>; Gerald M. Feierstein, Bilal Y. Saab, Karen E. Young, "US-Gulf Relations at the Crossroads: Time for a Recalibration," *Middle East Institute*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/us-gulf-relations-crossroads-time-recalibration>.

<sup>513</sup> "UAE Strongman Sheigh Mohammed bin Zayed Named New President," *Reuters*, May 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/sheikh-mohammed-bin-zayed-elected-uae-president-state-news-agency-2022-05-14/>.

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some of the grievances commonly levied against autocratic rulers to eliminate calls for political or social change, and (3) replacing state-sponsored religious ideology with a secular brand of patriotic nationalism.

*Demobilizing Political Islamism Through Repression*

Authoritarian repression of Islamic political activists through arrest, torture and exile remains a popular method to discourage protests and demonstrations. The degree of repression varies by each state, likely consistent with the regimes' previous experience or current relationship with Islamist groups and the perceived threat these groups pose to the ruler. For example, Sisi in Egypt arguably upholds the harshest policies targeting political dissent, and the MB in particular, due to the circumstances in which he seized power. Conversely, comparatively limited demonstrations in both Saudi and the UAE prompted the expansion of existing laws to target political Islamists but did not require mass imprisonment and execution as was the case in Egypt. This sub-section tracks the quartet's repressive measures taken to demobilize political Islamism domestically and argues that the governments are unlikely to show leniency to these movements given the perceived threat groups like the MB pose to their regimes.

*Sisi's Dilemma*

Of the quartet regimes, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has the most to fear in this cold war with political Islamists. For nearly 100 years, Hassan al-Banna's legacy of promoting social and political change in Egypt, as well as Sayyid Qutb's calls for more radical change, has ideologically united the sprawling membership of the MB against several Egyptian regimes, including Gamal Abdul Nasser in the 1950s-1960s, Anwar Sadat in the 1970s, Murbarak, and Sisi.<sup>514</sup> All four of these authoritarians experimented with accommodating the MB, but ultimately resorted to heavy repression of the Brotherhood to stay in power.<sup>515</sup> Even

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<sup>514</sup> Barbara Zollner, "Surviving Repression: How Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Has Carried On," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, March 11, 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/11/surviving-repression-how-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-has-carried-on-pub-78552>.

<sup>515</sup> Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 96, 108.

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more so than his predecessors, Sisi has had to convince his people that his rule is legitimate, despite ascending to power via a coup backed by regional partners that overthrew Egypt's first ever democratically-elected president and a Brotherhood member.

Sisi's military background and the circumstances in which he seized presidential power influence his repressive tactics of the MB, meaning that he had no option of initially experimenting with accommodation. After banning the MB and categorizing the group as a terrorist organization in 2013, Sisi ordered the arrests of the Brotherhood's elite members within the Guidance Office and Shura Council, along with tens of thousands of alleged members of the MB. Many of these detainees were subjected to abuses and sub-standard confinement.<sup>516</sup> Human Rights Watch reported in June 2021:

Egypt's highest appellate court, upheld death sentences for 12 Muslim Brotherhood leaders, members, and sympathizers as well as long prison sentences for hundreds of others convicted in a mass unfair trial of over 700 dissidents, including 22 children, charged with involvement in the 2013 Rab'a sit-in that opposed the military ouster of President Mohamed Morsy.<sup>517</sup>

Note that these charges are levied nearly ten years after the alleged crime. In targeting the elite MB members and affiliated Islamic institutions, Sisi likely assumes that decapitating the MB leadership will disintegrate the organization, as most strongly hierarchical or pyramidal groups do.<sup>518</sup>

Sisi also targeted what Dr. Carrie Wickham coined as the "parallel Islamic sector" in Egypt, including Brotherhood-affiliated schools, clinics, welfare societies, businesses, and neighborhoods that compete with government parallel institutions.<sup>519</sup> Egypt's massive Ministry of Religious Endowments initiated a slow purge of Brotherhood and like-minded dissidents post-

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<sup>516</sup> Zollner, "Surviving Repression," <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/11/surviving-repression-how-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-has-carried-on-pub-78552>.

<sup>517</sup> Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2022* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2022), 214-215. [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2022/01/World%20Report%202022%20web%20pdf\\_0.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2022/01/World%20Report%202022%20web%20pdf_0.pdf).

<sup>518</sup> Zollner, "Surviving Repression," <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/11/surviving-repression-how-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-has-carried-on-pub-78552>.

<sup>519</sup> Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam*, 97; Zollner, "Surviving Repression," <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/11/surviving-repression-how-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-has-carried-on-pub-78552>.

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2013 by limiting mosque hours to prayer times, overseeing *zakat*, and even enforcing a fixed sermon to be read in mosques, much to the dislike of al-Azhar imams.<sup>520</sup> Crucially, some of these fixed sermons tore a page from the Saudi brand of Wahhabism by emphasizing “the duty of obeying the *wali al-amr* (the ruler) ... [and] the necessity of combating terrorism and extremism (terms the ministry uses to describe not only the Islamic State but also the Muslim Brotherhood).”<sup>521</sup>

Finally, Sisi leverages an ideological war against the MB. The Egyptian regime claims the Islamist group has ideological ties to terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State to justify its repressive policies.<sup>522</sup> Dar al-Iftaa’s sheikhs, such as former Grand Mufti of Egypt Sheikh Ali Gomaa or current Grand Mufti Sheikh Shawki Allam, assist Sisi in this effort. As one of Egypt’s chief Islamic authorities, Dar al-Iftaa’s Muftis issued dozens of *fatwahs* calling on their hundreds of thousands of followers to back Sisi’s campaigns in Libya and especially against the Brotherhood. Gomaa offered the following guidance to a group of Egyptian military officers (including Sisi) regarding the MB: “Shoot them in the heart. ... Blessed are those who kill them, and those who are killed by them. ... We must cleanse our Egypt from these riffraff. ... They shame us. ... They stink. This is how God has created them. They are hypocrites and seceders.”<sup>523</sup> It is unclear if Gomaa was forced to say this or if he was referring to a narrow subsection of MB rebels engaged in violence, but the rhetoric illustrates the deep hatred the regime maintains for the MB and the ideological war it pursued against them.

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<sup>520</sup> Nathan J. Brown and Michele Dunne, “Who Will Speak for Islam in Egypt—And Who Will Listen?,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 7, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/who-will-speak-for-islam-in-egypt-and-who-will-listen-pub-84654>.

<sup>521</sup> Salih, “The Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings,” 199. See also Madawi Al-Rasheed, “Saudi Regime Resilience After the 2011 Arab Popular Uprisings,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2016): 15-16 and Matthiesen, “The Domestic Sources of Saudi Foreign Policy,” 2; Brown and Dunne, “Who Will Speak for Islam in Egypt,” <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/who-will-speak-for-islam-in-egypt-and-who-will-listen-pub-84654>.

<sup>522</sup> Zollner, “Surviving Repression,” <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/11/surviving-repression-how-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-has-carried-on-pub-78552>; Khalil al-Anani, “All the Dictator’s Sheikhs,” *Foreign Policy*, July 20, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/20/all-the-dictators-sheikhs/>.

<sup>523</sup> Al-Anani, “All the Dictator’s Sheikhs,” <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/20/all-the-dictators-sheikhs/>.

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Mass imprisonment, abuse of MB detainees, strict religious oversight, and ideological slander by the Sisi regime and its clerics comes at a high cost to the Egyptian monarchy. While the true number of prisoners in Egyptian prisons and costs of detaining them are impossible to know, one 2022 estimate suggested that Egypt spends at least the equivalent of nearly \$120 million annually to fund its 49 over-capacity state prisons.<sup>524</sup> Senior members of the MB, including Ibrahim Munir (the Brotherhood's deputy general guide), publicly have stated a willingness to reconcile with Sisi's regime if it would improve prison conditions.<sup>525</sup> In April 2022, Sisi released 41 political activists from prison to encourage "national dialogue" with his political rivals, but not one of the released activists was a MB member. Dr. Mustafa Kamel al-Sayyed at the American University in Cairo assessed that Sisi remains "afraid that the Muslim Brotherhood will take advantage of the [economic] crisis to call for demonstrations, as happened before."<sup>526</sup>

Sisi is unlikely to relent in punishing the MB and like-minded political Islamists while he remains Egypt's dictator. Human rights abuses towards these groups and other dissidents aside, Sisi so far has been unable to resolve pressing socioeconomic grievances such as high poverty rates, youth unemployment, inflation, and the climbing price of grain because of the Russia-Ukraine war.<sup>527</sup> Releasing MB members from prison or dialoguing with the alleged terrorist group likely would only benefit the MB itself. Not only would relaxing policies against the MB almost certainly dislodge Sisi from the protection of his fellow Arab monarchs in the quartet, but the present poor economy, coupled with a disgruntled youth population, would likely attract new

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<sup>524</sup> Rida Mara, "The Social and Economic Cost of Egypt's Prison System," *Arab Reform Initiative*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-social-and-economic-cost-of-egypts-prison-system/>.

<sup>525</sup> Khalid Hassan, "Is Brotherhood's Appeal for Reconciliation with Cairo Genuine?," *Al-Monitor*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/brotherhoods-appeal-reconciliation-cairo-genuine>.

<sup>526</sup> Muhammed Magdy, "Cairo Releases Dozens of Activists, Calls for Dialogue with Political Opposition," May 3, 2022, *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/cairo-releases-dozens-activists-calls-dialogue-political-opposition>.

<sup>527</sup> Brown and Dunne, "Who Will Speak for Islam in Egypt," <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/who-will-speak-for-islam-in-egypt-and-who-will-listen-pub-84654>; "Egyptian Economy Experiences 'Sharp Fall' From Ukraine War," *Al-Monitor*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/egyptian-economy-experiences-sharp-fall-ukraine-war>.

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MB followers relatively easily and speedily. The Brotherhood is known for providing services and institutions where the Egyptian government falls short. Sisi's security strategy for his indefinite rule thus likely includes continued repression of the MB and attempting to control the broader religious establishment, all the while preaching to the international community that religious and political reform is coming to Egypt.<sup>528</sup>

*Gulf Monarch's Domestic Repression of Political Islam*

With the notable exception of Bahrain, the Gulf authoritarian states comparatively suffered only minor demonstrations in response to the regional uprisings.<sup>529</sup> To some extent, one would expect the opposite given Saudi Arabia's notoriously poor human rights record and its corrupt leadership.<sup>530</sup> Less surprisingly, oil revenues were used to purchase obedience and to discourage revolts. Prior to, and during the Arab Spring, oil revenues steadily increased from \$62 a barrel in 2009 to \$106 a barrel in 2013, allowing the ruler-citizen social contract to remain in place in that volatile period.<sup>531</sup> High oil prices also enabled Saudi and the UAE to prop up non-oil states, such as the fellow monarchies of Oman, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, and the anti-Islamist General Haftar in Libya.<sup>532</sup>

Further, many of the Gulf states adopted new, or adjusted existing, legal measures to discourage domestic opposition to their respective autocratic leaderships. Some of these measures included "house arrest, detention, imprisonment, the filing of charges, torture, and, in extreme cases, execution" according to Dr. Zahra Babar at the Georgetown University in

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<sup>528</sup> Brown and Dunne, "Who Will Speak for Islam in Egypt," <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/who-will-speak-for-islam-in-egypt-and-who-will-listen-pub-84654>.

<sup>529</sup> Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest," *New York Times*, March 14, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html>.

<sup>530</sup> "Authoritarianism and Corruption in Saudi Arabia," *Transparency International* (blog), February 12, 2020, <https://www.transparency.org/en/blog/authoritarianism-and-corruption-in-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>531</sup> Ahmad, "The Enduring 'Arab Spring'," 96.

<sup>532</sup> Ahmad, "The Enduring 'Arab Spring'," 96.

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Qatar.<sup>533</sup> In 2013 and 2014, Saudi and UAE anti-terrorism laws broadened their definitions of terrorism to more easily prosecute and convict those who were “disturbing public order,” “endangering national unity,” “defaming the state or its status,” “inciting fear amongst a group of people,” or generally “opposing the country.”<sup>534</sup> Prominent Saudi cleric Salman al-Awda may face the death penalty for his alleged “ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and public support for imprisoned dissidents.”<sup>535</sup> Al-Awda also stands accused for his public disapproval of the Saudi-led blockade on Qatar in 2017 and support of former Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.<sup>536</sup> Salman al-Awda is only one of many activists, scholars, journalists, and even family members that MbS had arrested for alleged ties to terrorist groups or advocate for social change in the kingdom.<sup>537</sup>

*Demobilizing Political Islamism by Concession and Nationalism*

The second method the monarchies employ to demobilize political Islamism domestically is providing some social or political changes that are typically advocated by Islamist groups. Ironically, Qatar sets the best example in this regard. Though Islah initially played a critical role in establishing Qatar’s Ministry of Education beginning in the 1950s, Roberts wrote that the local MB-branch in Qatar never advocated political change in the country and even “closed itself down in 1999, arguing that the state was providing well for its people and, as such, Islah had no role to play.”<sup>538</sup> In the small, Wahhabi, conservative, and rich state of Qatar, the social contract between the ruler and its citizens (who are very few this case) seems to work. Under the

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<sup>533</sup> Zahra Babar, “The ‘Enemy Within,’” *Middle East Journal* 71, no. 4 (Autumn 2017): 525.

<sup>534</sup> Babar, “The ‘Enemy Within,’” 537, 241-542.

<sup>535</sup> HRW, *World Report 2022*, 570.

<sup>536</sup> “Saudi Arabia: Prominent Cleric May Face Death Penalty,” Human Rights Watch, September 12, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/12/saudi-arabia-prominent-cleric-may-face-death-penalty>.

<sup>537</sup> “Saudi Arabia: Religious Thinker on Trial for His Life: Criticized ‘Extremism’ in School Curriculum,” Human Rights Watch, June 23, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/23/saudi-arabia-religious-thinker-trial-his-life>.

<sup>538</sup> Roberts, “Qatar and the UAE,” 558.

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repressive regime in Saudi Arabia with its large and provincial population, sectarian issues, and history of state-sponsored Islamist proselytism, and under the comparatively liberal federation of monarchies in the UAE, the old social contracts are not as simple.

Saudi Arabia's generous welfare system likely deterred most would-be protestors during the uprisings, but it did not prevent demonstrations entirely. Where there were internal demonstrations, petrodollars assuaged most grievances, as noted in the previous section. For example, the uprisings provided the rare opportunity for the underprivileged Shiite population in Saudi's Eastern province to peacefully petition the royal family for improved living conditions and wages. King Abdullah speedily allocated nearly \$30 billion in unemployment aid, \$2 billion towards housing development, and increased government salaries by 15 percent.<sup>539</sup> This acquiescence likely occurred in response to what King Abdullah was witnessing in Bahrain, where the Shia majority attempted to overthrow the Sunni minority government in 2011.<sup>540</sup> On the reverse side, those Shia demonstrators in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province who rejected the government's opening and instead established their own underground militant movements were successively routed in pitched battles staged in Awamiya during 2013 and 2014.

Riyadh's historic approach in confronting political Islam has shifted under MbS. During the 2011-2013 unrest, prominent Sunni clerics, such as the Saudi grand mufti Abdulaziz al-Shaykh, discouraged Saudi citizens from rebelling by describing opposition to *wali al-umr* as a sin under Islamic law.<sup>541</sup> A decade later, Ahmad argued "Saudi Arabia ... has understood the limits of maintaining a coercive and intrusive order on the basis of an avowed "true" Islam, and is presently seeking to anchor royal legitimacy in moderate Islam and appeals to nationalism."<sup>542</sup> This is evident in MbS' multiple religious and social reforms made in his five years as crown prince.

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<sup>539</sup> Salih, "The Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings," 198-199.

<sup>540</sup> Ahmad, "The Enduring 'Arab Spring'," 96; Bronner and Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest," <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html>.

<sup>541</sup> Salih, "The Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings," 199; Al-Rasheed, "Saudi Regime Resilience After the 2011 Arab Popular Uprisings," 15-16; Matthiesen, "The Domestic Sources of Saudi Foreign Policy," 2.

<sup>542</sup> Ahmad, "The Enduring 'Arab Spring'," 104.

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The transition from state-sponsored religious ideology to a more secular form of patriotic nationalism is becoming commonplace throughout MENA. James Dorsey notes that MbS and MbZ “have to varying degrees replaced religion with nationalism as the ideology legitimising their rule and sought to ensure that various countries in the region broadly adhere to their worldview.”<sup>543</sup> Indeed, it is likely that MbS’ close relationship with MbZ, in conjunction with MbS’ youth, has re-shaped the Saudi crown prince’s regime security strategy and vision for the kingdom. Roberts wrote of the former Emirati crown prince (now president):

...Muhammad bin Zayid, who has long been in charge of security and defense portfolios, often prioritizes military and security-focused statecraft. As such, his (and thus the UAE’s) uncompromising response to the Brotherhood, attempting to institute a quasi-Jeffersonian separation of church and state both domestically and abroad, closely reflects his securitizing modus operandi.<sup>544</sup>

It is arguable that MbZ’s leadership philosophy has resonated not just with MbS, but with President Sisi in Egypt and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa in Bahrain. The quartet monarchs unitedly isolated Qatar during the Gulf Crisis and are ideologically united in demobilizing political Islamism with one exception: Saudi support of Islah in Yemen.

King Salman and MbS make a special exception in their war on the MB for the MB-affiliated group Islah in Yemen. Since the coalition began in 2015, Islah welcomed Saudi intervention due to their shared interests in defeating the Houthis. The Saudi government even left Islah off its official list of deemed terrorist groups associated with the MB.<sup>545</sup> The UAE and even Qatar disapprove of the Saudi-Islah relationship (albeit for competing reasons) and have used their media platforms to attempt to weaken Saudi-Islah relations.<sup>546</sup> Islah and the Saudi-led coalition have different end-state goals and the Saudi royal family almost certainly views the

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<sup>543</sup> James M. Dorsey, “Middle East Futures: Decade(s) of Defiance and Dissent,” *Modern Diplomacy*, January 23, 2021, <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2021/01/23/middle-east-futures-decades-of-defiance-and-dissent/>.

<sup>544</sup> Roberts, “Qatar and the UAE,” 558.

<sup>545</sup> Karim Al-Yemani, “A Widening Schism Between Saudi Arabia and the Islah Party Prolongs Yemen’s War,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/widening-schism-between-saudi-arabia-and-islah-party-prolongs-yemens-war>.

<sup>546</sup> Mutahar Al-Sofari, “An Exceptional Case: Saudi Relations with Yemen’s Islah Party,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exceptional-case-saudi-relations-yemens-islah-party>.

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Islah partnership as a means to an end. But finding an acceptable “end” in Yemen is fleeting. The partnership has paid dividends in weakening the Houthis, but the Saudi government appears unwilling to accommodate Islah’s—the second most influential political party in Yemen—desire to govern the state in a coalition of parties.<sup>547</sup>

**Estimate**

While the momentum of political Islamism was significantly degraded after the 2013 Egyptian coup, the unresolved ideological differences between the authoritarian governments, Islamists, and political Islamism’s state sponsors point towards sustained geopolitical conflict into 2030. At first glance, the authoritarian states appear to have won this cold war. Ennahda’s marginalization in Tunisia under President Saied, bloated Egyptian prisons filled with suspected MB sympathizers, and Turkish and Qatari rapprochement with the Gulf monarchies would support that conclusion. However, the resiliency of Ennahda and the MB, sustained conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, Qatar’s unwillingness to capitulate to any of the quartet’s thirteen demands during a nearly four-year blockade, and Turkey’s unwillingness to sever its ties to Islamist movements, all argue the cold war is not over yet.

*Ennahda’s and MB’s Weakened Status in 2030*

The Ennahda (Muslim Democratic) party in Tunisia is unlikely to disappear from Tunisian politics despite what President Saied might try to do to silence them. The political party is acclimatized to repression, given their prolonged subjugation under former president Ben Ali. Now with over ten years of influence and involvement in Tunisia’s political processes, the political party has shown resilience and an ability to adapt to changing circumstances. As recent as 2019, Ennahda won 18 percent of the parliamentary seats, more than any other political faction. Dr. Sharon Grewal from Brookings’ Middle East Policy Center argued that Ennahda’s reversion to revolutionary and religious rhetoric leading up to the elections—promising to fight

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<sup>547</sup> Al-Yemani, “A Widening Schism Between Saudi Arabia and the Islah Party Prolongs Yemen’s War,” <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/widening-schism-between-saudi-arabia-and-islah-party-prolongs-yemens-war>; Al-Sofari, “An Exceptional Case,” <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exceptional-case-saudi-relations-yemens-islah-party>.

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corruption and even introduce *zakat* to alleviate poverty—likely contributed to their success.<sup>548</sup> Tunisians' views of President Saied in the coming months and years, especially his handling of the proposed December 2022 elections, is likely to impact Ennahda's image as either a legitimate political faction or a resistance movement. Ennahda has experience as both and will likely continue modifying its political platform suited to whichever constituency—Islamic or secular—it thinks will secure its future political relevancy.

The MB's fate into 2030 is less certain but is generally tied both to President Sisi's willingness (or unwillingness) to dialogue with the group's leaders and the group's state sponsors' commitment to the MB's survival. Many of the MB's leadership are either in Egyptian prisons or in exile. Sisi is unlikely to release MB affiliates from prison and certainly not their leaders as doing so would invoke the ire of the Gulf monarchies that installed Sisi as president in the 2013 coup. Instead, President Sisi will likely strive to divert criticism of his regime by making small concessions to the international community on human rights matters and even to the MB on religious criticisms. For example, in October 2021, Sisi released Egypt's first ever Human Rights Strategy, and in May 2022, he restored Egyptian mosques to full capacity amid criticism from the MB leadership.<sup>549</sup>

#### *Weakened (but Sustained) State Sponsorship of Political Islamist Movements*

Of the two chief sponsors of political Islamism, Turkey is more likely than Qatar to overtly empower such groups for the near future while Erdoğan remains in power. According to 2020 data, it is estimated that as many as 15,000-30,000 Egyptians in Turkey are affiliated with the MB on some level, making it difficult for President Erdoğan or the AKP to ever expel them

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<sup>548</sup> Sharan Grewal, "Winners and Losers of Tunisia's Parliamentary Elections," *Washington Post*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/08/winners-losers-tunisia-parliamentary-elections/>.

<sup>549</sup> Siobhan O'Grady, "Under Fire for Abuses, Egypt Releases Human Rights Strategy to Mixed Reviews," *Washington Post*, October 6, 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/egypt-sissi-human-rights/2021/10/04/98d73674-214e-11ec-a8d9-0827a2a4b915\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/egypt-sissi-human-rights/2021/10/04/98d73674-214e-11ec-a8d9-0827a2a4b915_story.html); Baher al-Kady, "Egypt Removes All Mosque Restrictions Amid Brotherhood Criticism," *Al-Monitor*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/egypt-removes-all-mosque-restrictions-amid-brotherhood-criticism>.

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wholly.<sup>550</sup> Further, the AKP leader likely views the MB as an asset and ally, not only in exporting political Islam, but also in his competition with Saudi Arabia for religious leadership (a topic discussed in the next chapter). In the near term, Erdoğan appears willing to reconcile with the Gulf monarchies. This somewhat unexpected rapprochement most likely is economically driven, with Erdoğan hoping the oil-rich states will boost Turkey's worsening economy prior to the 2023 presidential elections.<sup>551</sup> If Erdoğan manages to continue his nearly 20-year tenure as the head of the AKP and Turkish leadership, his foreign policies are unlikely to change.

Qatar's future role in backing political Islamist movements is uncertain. Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani appears willing to reconcile with the Gulf monarchies but will likely continue seeking opportunities to distinguish Qatar from the state's larger, militaristically-superior neighbors. Hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup is one example, as this will be the first time the world's largest sporting event will be held in the Middle East.<sup>552</sup> Roberts argued that while it is theoretically possible for Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani to reverse his father's foreign policies, given that there are no formal restraints on his power, he is unlikely to do so because challenging his influential father's role in establishing the modern Qatari state would be too risky within the domestic political context.<sup>553</sup> This is in stark contrast to MbS, as noted in chapter three, who is already taking this approach by parting from the traditional conservative, Wahhabi values of the state in favor of his own more secular attitudes.

*Enduring Authoritarian Repression and Political Islamism's Resistance*

The quartet regimes will likely continue targeting political Islamist movements through repression, occasional trivial concessions, and by replacing religion with nationalism in their

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<sup>550</sup> Ayyash, "The Turkish Future of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood," <https://tcf.org/content/report/turkish-future-egypts-muslim-brotherhood/?session=1>.

<sup>551</sup> Francesco Siccardi, "What is Behind Turkish President Erdogan's Visit to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, February 11, 2022, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/86421>.

<sup>552</sup> George Hay, "Qatar's World Cup Will Pay Gulf-Wide Dividends," *Reuters*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/qatars-world-cup-will-pay-gulf-wide-dividends-2021-12-22/>.

<sup>553</sup> Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE," 562.

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rhetoric through 2030. The current heads of state in most of the Gulf countries played active roles in the Arab Spring and generally emerged more powerful in the uprising's aftermath. Relenting in their oppression of Islamist movements would be counterintuitive to their regime security. Though MbZ and MbS have shown signs of rapprochement with Turkey and Qatar, the ideological differences between these monarchies and the Islamists' state sponsors remain. As such, the protracted civil war in Libya and the warming tensions in Tunisia are likely to fester if Turkey and Qatar remain committed to backing non-authoritarian governments. If the last twenty years of violence resulting from this cold war is any indicator, so long as repressive authoritarian regimes exist, political Islamism is likely to fight back.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>554</sup> Ayoob and Lussier, *The Many Faces of Political Islam*, 94

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**CHAPTER 5****TURKEY'S BID FOR LEADERSHIP OF THE MUSLIM WORLD**

Turkey's competition with Saudi Arabia for leadership of the Muslim world has aggravated the three previously discussed Middle East cold wars; its détente could simultaneously rescue Turkey's economy, strengthen the Gulf's military posture, and abate many of the existing drivers of the other regional cold wars through 2030. President Erdoğan's centralized authority has allowed him and his party to promote their neo-Ottoman vision, with Erdoğan filling the role of Islam's new "Sultan." Saudi Arabia has spent decades—since 1979—discrediting Iran's competing claim to lead "true Islam" (as discussed in chapter three), but now must also fend off Turkey's bid for religious leadership under President Erdoğan and the AKP. However, due to numerous geopolitical and economic factors, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies now seek rapprochement under specific conditions. Erdoğan's and MbS' settlements could change the course of the cold war for leadership of Islam, the Saudi-Iran rivalry, and perhaps even Erdoğan's future as leader of the Republic of Turkey.

This chapter is divided into three main parts. The first section tracks the rise of the AKP to establish the foundation for President Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman vision and the resulting competition against both Islamic monarchies and Wahhabism. The second section argues that Turkey's economic crisis and the war in Ukraine will likely incentivize Erdoğan to reconnect with his rivals in the Gulf. In exchange for Gulf investments and bilateral trade agreements, Turkey may offer to play a more loyal role in the bloc united against Iran. The third section contends that Erdoğan's removal from power would likely cool tensions between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, but that the conservative Turkish population is likely to perpetuate the AKP's neo-Ottoman ideology indefinitely.

This chapter also differs from the previous four in that it disproportionately focuses on the main agitator in the conflict, Turkey, as Saudi Arabia's proselytization campaigns and religious outreach were well documented previously. President Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman policies compound the existing geopolitical conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and manifest themselves in the cold war between Islamist political groups and the Arab monarchies.

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**Neo-Ottomanism: Turkey's Turn to the Middle East**

Turkish scholars Tayyar Ari and Omar Munassar contend that Turkey's interest in returning to the Middle East as a regional power began as early as the 1980s under former Turkish prime minister (1983-1989) and president (1989-1993) Turgut Özal.<sup>555</sup> Regional disruption such as the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, and the impending end of the Cold War led Özal to cultivate "the early seeds of neo-Ottomanism" and reconsider the "traditional non-involvement policy towards the Middle East."<sup>556</sup> An educated economist, Özal believed that the key to restoring Turkey's regional power was to expand Turkey's economic footprint in Europe and in formerly Ottoman lands, while simultaneously emphasizing Turkey's identity as "a Muslim country."<sup>557</sup> Özal's neoliberal economic and political policies resonated well with both the Turkish Muslim community and the historically skeptical Republicans. As the market grew and space became available for moderate Islamic expression, nostalgia for Turkey's glorified Ottoman history filled classrooms and media and became a framework with which to solve Turkey's contemporary issues.<sup>558</sup>

Özal's neo-Ottomanism extended to his foreign policy and embraced ethnic and religious pluralism. Less concerned with national security after the Gulf War and Cold War, Özal looked to expand Turkish regional influence in the Caucasus, Balkans, and Middle East (former protectorates of the Ottoman Empire).<sup>559</sup> The Turkish president stressed to these diverse countries and groups their shared Ottoman heritage and Islamic roots, which resulted in many of these states calling on Turkey for aid amid mass killings and ethnic cleansing in their home states.<sup>560</sup> By the end of his rule, Özal energized Turkey's free-market economy, retracted

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<sup>555</sup> Tayyar Ari and Omar Munassar, "Two Stages of Turkey's Quest for Regional Power Status in the Middle East: An Integrated Role-States-seeking Approach," *Gazi Akademik Bakış* 14, no. 27 (2020): 11.

<sup>556</sup> Ari and Munassar, "Two Stages of Turkey's Quest for Regional Power Status," 11.

<sup>557</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 108-109.

<sup>558</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 109-110.

<sup>559</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 117-118.

<sup>560</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 118.

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elements of Turkey's strict Kemalist policies in exchange for Ottoman ones, and revived Turkey's Ottoman identity as a protector of all Muslims. But where Özal executed a pluralist approach oriented toward economic liberalism, Özal's successors capitalized on this neo-Ottoman foundation to progressively consolidate power and pursue a more aggressive foreign policy as will be shown.

Özal's "seeds" of neo-Ottomanism took root under Ahmet Davutoğlu, who at different times served as Turkish foreign policy advisor (2003-2009), minister of foreign affairs (2009-2014) and prime minister (2014-2016). Dr. Harunoğlu from Marmara University in Istanbul wrote of Davutoğlu:

Davutoglu promoted the belief that the Republic of Turkey, under the pretext of "Westernization," had neglected the remnants of its Ottoman legacy—such as the Islamic heritage coming from the caliphate and relations with the Muslim world—for many decades. Over the years, this neglect had dragged Turkey into a humbled position as a state unable to shape world history. ...For Davutoglu, Turkey had a role as "order setter" in the Turkish hinterland, where the most important bond among peoples was Islam.<sup>561</sup>

Davutoğlu made it his mission to Islamize Turkish foreign policy. He and the AKP promoted their neo-Ottoman vision using "strategic depth" as a geopolitical strategy beginning in 2002.<sup>562</sup> Strategic depth attempted to assert Turkey's renewed role as a regional peace broker and Islamic governance exemplar over formerly Ottoman lands.<sup>563</sup> Özal laid the foundation for neo-Ottomanism, Davutoğlu Islamized it, and Erdoğan exploited it.

*Erdoğan: Islam's New Savior*

Erdoğan was never interested in the modern Republican, secular state founded by Atatürk. Instead, Erdoğan longed to restore Turkey's historic role as the center of Islamic civilization under the Ottoman Empire and to rule the Islamic world as the sultans before him did.<sup>564</sup> In 2012, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan said as much in a public speech: "Presiding over

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<sup>561</sup> Harunoğlu, "Turkey's Intensifying Partnership with Qatar," 2.

<sup>562</sup> Ari and Munassar, "Two Stages of Turkey's Quest for Regional Power Status," 12-13.

<sup>563</sup> Ari and Munassar, "Two Stages of Turkey's Quest for Regional Power Status," 8.

<sup>564</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 155.

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the heritage of our ancestors, the Ottoman State that ruled the World for 600 years, we would revive the Ottoman consciousness again.”<sup>565</sup> Some of Erdoğan’s followers compare his rule to that of the nineteenth-century Ottoman sultan Abdulhamid II (1842–1918), who “ruled with absolute power, paranoia, and pan-Islamism” according to Dr. M. Hakan Yavuz.<sup>566</sup> The two leaders share remarkable characteristics and experiences. Abdulhamid II and Erdoğan sought to expand economic cooperation with Europe without sacrificing Turkish or Muslim culture, supported a parliamentary system until it did not suit their authoritarian objectives, seized control of media outlets (journalism and news agencies) to stamp out opposition, and survived multiple coups d’état.<sup>567</sup>

*Islamizing and Ottomanizing at Home and Abroad*

The AKP’s mission to Islamize Turkey culminated under Erdoğan, who amplified the party’s mission by pursuing a role as the leader of Muslims domestically and globally.<sup>568</sup> At home, Erdoğan has converted at least 1,477 public schools into *Imam-Hatips* (religious schools taught by Sunni clerics), sponsored the construction of the massive Camlica mosque in Istanbul, and rededicated the famous Hagia Sofia museum into a mosque.<sup>569</sup> Abroad, Ankara has funded the construction of Ottoman-style mega-mosques in Albania (the largest mosque in the Balkans), Ghana (the largest mosque in West Africa), and in Kyrgyzstan (the largest mosque in Central

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<sup>565</sup> Ali Erken, “Re-imagining the Ottoman past in Turkish politics: past and present,” *Insight Turkey* 15, no. 3 (2013): 184; Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 155.

<sup>566</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 147.

<sup>567</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 147-149.

<sup>568</sup> Recep Dogan, “Analyzing the Institution of Caliphate in the Context of Political Islamists,” *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 15, no. 1 (June 2019): 117.

<sup>569</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 145; Soner Cagaptay, “Making Turkey Great Again,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 170; Yilmaz and Bashirov, “The AKP After 15 Years,” 1823; “Hagia Sophia: Turkey Turns Iconic Istanbul Museum Into Mosque,” *BBC News*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53366307>.

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Asia) with plans for over 2,000 additional mosques in countries like Venezuela, Cuba, and Germany.<sup>570</sup>

In addition to mosque building, Erdoğan imbued Turkish architecture with neo-Ottoman symbolism. The 2013 Gezi Park protests were instigated by then Prime Minister Erdoğan's proposed "re-imagined Ottoman military barracks" construction project in Istanbul.<sup>571</sup> The Ottoman-era barracks-turned shopping center was only one of the hundreds of other AKP renovation projects in Istanbul. Dr. Esra Akcan, a Turkish-American architect and Professor at Cornell University, identified that at least 180 shopping malls were built on former parks in Istanbul between 2000-2010, neighborhoods were "renewed" by replacing homes "with a mock-up Ottoman neighborhood with pitched roofs and projecting bays," and the AKP's Ottoman-style palace was built on the razed ground of the former Atatürk Forest Farm.<sup>572</sup> Gezi Park, the Atatürk Cultural Center, and Taksim square were all symbols of the Turkish Republic, and the AKP deliberately sought to Ottomanize them.<sup>573</sup> What started as a sit-in protest in Gezi Park became weeks of violet protest between police and demonstrators, setting the stage for future crackdowns on civic activism and strengthened policing powers.<sup>574</sup>

Populism—a "core feature of Erdoğanism" according to Ihsan Yilmaz and Galib Bashirov—is used as a political strategy by the Turkish president and AKP to project an image of defending the "real people" (loyal voters, oppressed Muslims) and delegitimizing opponents by referring to them as "traitors," "corrupt elite," "foreign interests," and "terrorists."<sup>575</sup> This extends to Erdoğan's foreign policy and rhetoric when he unapologetically berates the "Christian

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<sup>570</sup> John M. Beck, "Turkey's Global Soft-Power Push Is Built on Mosques," *Atlantic*, June 1, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/06/turkey-builds-mosques-abroad-global-soft-power/590449/>.

<sup>571</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 144, 164, 167.

<sup>572</sup> Esra Akcan, "The 'Occupy' Turn in the Global City Paradigm: The Architecture of AK Party's Istanbul and the Gezi Movement," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 2, no. 2 (2015): 371-372.

<sup>573</sup> Akcan, "The 'Occupy' Turn in the Global City Paradigm," 372-374.

<sup>574</sup> Özge Zihnioğlu, "The Legacy of the Gezi Protests in Turkey," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 24, 2019, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/10/24/legacy-of-gezi-protests-in-turkey-pub-80142>.

<sup>575</sup> Yilmaz and Bashirov, "The AKP After 15 Years," 1820-1821.

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West” for the alleged holy war it wages against Muslims worldwide.<sup>576</sup> In his self-appointed role as the new “Sultan,” President Erdoğan put the AKP’s neo-Ottoman vision to the test during the Arab Spring by propping up Islamist political groups and deploying troops to Qatar, Syria, Iraq, and Libya.<sup>577</sup>

Beyond Islamizing schools, building mosques, and blending its peculiar populist model with Islamism, the AKP under Erdoğan took additional measures to elevate Turkey’s status as Islam’s protector and leader. First, Turkey asserted regional dominance by pursuing an aggressive foreign policy using economic and military levers. Second, Erdoğan mirrored many of the Gulf monarchies’ power consolidation behaviors domestically to bring himself onto a level playing field with the powerful Saudi monarchy regionally. And third, Erdoğan publicly delegitimizes non-Islamist, undemocratic dictators and monarchies. These three tactics are explored more in-depth in the next sections.

*Asserting Regional Dominance: Erdoğan’s Aggressive Foreign Policy*

In proclaiming to be a “man of the people” who stands up to the corrupt elite, Erdoğan seeks to attract the allegiances of Islamists who feel oppressed by their authoritarian governments in the MENA region.<sup>578</sup> Throughout his political career as Turkey’s prime minister (2003-2014) and president (2014-present), Erdoğan pursued an aggressive foreign policy intended to reclaim Turkey’s historic role as leader of the Muslim world and challenge the current *de facto* leadership of the Saudi royal family. Turkey’s primary asset in this endeavor has been its economic success. Frustrated and humiliated by the European Union’s (EU) rejection of Turkey’s accession pleas, Erdoğan turned to the Middle East, Balkans, and Caucasus to diversify its markets.<sup>579</sup> Crystal Ennis and Bessma Momani from the University of Waterloo argued in 2013 that this move established “‘economic interdependence’ with the Arab Middle East to bring

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<sup>576</sup> Cagaptay, “Making Turkey Great Again,” 170.

<sup>577</sup> Al-Saud and Kéchichian, “The Evolving Security Landscape Around the Arabian Peninsula,” 10-11; Ahmad, “The Enduring Arab Spring,” 100.

<sup>578</sup> Yilmaz and Bashirov, “The AKP After 15 Years,” 1821-1822.

<sup>579</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 194.

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[Turkey's] political 'depth' and soft power to the region."<sup>580</sup> Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain are important importers of Turkish goods, and Turkey's robust industrial markets and construction projects attract Gulf investments.<sup>581</sup>

President Erdoğan also extended Turkey's military reach in the Middle East and North Africa. But Erdoğan built a \$50 million military base in Mogadishu, Somalia near the entrance of the Red Sea, discussed a future military base in Djibouti with ambassador Aden Abdillahi, and signed an agreement with the Sudanese government to construct a port at an old Ottoman-era naval base on Suakin Island.<sup>582</sup> Journalist Johnathan Gorvett theorized that the future neo-Ottoman port at Suakin Island could become a destination for Turkish pilgrims on their way to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, enhancing Turkey's role in that pilgrimage. Gorvett added, "That thought [Turkey controlling part of the pilgrimage] have not gone unnoticed in the Kingdom, or elsewhere in the opinion columns of the Arab Quartet."<sup>583</sup>

*Consolidating Power: Erdoğan's Seizure of Political and Religious Institutions*

While proclaiming to lead Islam's only functional democracy par excellence, Erdoğan noticeably emulates many of the Gulf monarchies' power consolidation behaviors. In 2017, Erdoğan dissolved the office of the Prime Minister via a referendum that most election observers assess only passed due to faulty (rigged) vote-counting.<sup>584</sup> The president accomplished this with the help of "regime-connected religious scholars" who declared that voting "yes" was a religious obligation, according to Yilmaz and Bashirov.<sup>585</sup> One such scholar was Hayrettin Karaman, a

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<sup>580</sup> Crystal A. Ennis and Bessma Momani, "Shaping the Middle East in the Midst of the Arab Uprisings: Turkish and Saudi Foreign Policy Strategies," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 6 (2013): 1130.

<sup>581</sup> Jonathan Gorvett, "Turkey's Arabian Nights," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (March/April 2018): 35.

<sup>582</sup> Gorvett, "Turkey's Arabian Nights," 35-36.

<sup>583</sup> Gorvett, "Turkey's Arabian Nights," 36.

<sup>584</sup> Yilmaz and Bashirov, "The AKP After 15 Years," 1817-1818.

<sup>585</sup> Yilmaz and Bashirov, "The AKP After 15 Years," 1823.

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professor of Islamic Law who often portrays Erdoğan as the rightful leader of the *umma*.<sup>586</sup> The passed referendum dissolved the parliamentary system in favor of an executive-style government that empowered Erdoğan to simultaneously be head of state, government, the AKP, police, and military.<sup>587</sup> He secured the presidency in 2018, stretching his 15-year political tenure to 2023.

Like his rivals in the Gulf, Erdoğan also cracked down on freedom of the press to control political narratives and crush dissent.<sup>588</sup> After the 2016 attempted coup, Erdoğan's government used emergency powers to "purge a total of 114,279 individuals from public service and shut down a total of 1,424 associations and 145 foundations by the end of 2017" according to Batuhan Aydagül, director of the Education Reform Initiative in Turkey.<sup>589</sup> Erdoğan further eliminated over 100 news outlets and stations, only leaving open stations that one Turkish journalist described as "propaganda machinery."<sup>590</sup> Turkey currently imprisons more journalists than any other country in the world—more than China, Russia, and Egypt combined.<sup>591</sup>

Not only did the 2013 and 2016 coups consolidate Erdoğan's political, policing, and military power within the state, but the coups granted Erdoğan absolute control over Turkey's sprawling Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet).<sup>592</sup> In direct competition with the Saudis' Council of Senior Scholars and Ministry of Islamic Affairs, the Diyanet controls every aspect of

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<sup>586</sup> Dogan, "Analyzing the Institution of Caliphate in the Context of Political Islamists," 117.

<sup>587</sup> Cagaptay, "Making Turkey Great Again," 171, 176.

<sup>588</sup> Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2021: Saudi Arabia," Freedom House, accessed July 2, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-net/2021>; Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2021: Turkey," Freedom House, accessed July 2, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-net/2021>.

<sup>589</sup> Batuhan Aydagül, "Civil Society Confronts Authoritarianism," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 16, no. 3 (2018): 59.

<sup>590</sup> Chico Harlan, "Erdogan Stood Up for Khashoggi – While Turkey Jails More Journalists Than Any Other Country," *Washington Post*, October 24, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/erdogan-stood-up-for-khashoggi--while-turkey-jails-more-journalists-than-any-other-country/2018/10/24/a47250d6-d6fb-11e8-8384-bcc5492fef49\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/erdogan-stood-up-for-khashoggi--while-turkey-jails-more-journalists-than-any-other-country/2018/10/24/a47250d6-d6fb-11e8-8384-bcc5492fef49_story.html).

<sup>591</sup> Harlan, "Erdogan Stood Up for Khashoggi," [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/erdogan-stood-up-for-khashoggi--while-turkey-jails-more-journalists-than-any-other-country/2018/10/24/a47250d6-d6fb-11e8-8384-bcc5492fef49\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/erdogan-stood-up-for-khashoggi--while-turkey-jails-more-journalists-than-any-other-country/2018/10/24/a47250d6-d6fb-11e8-8384-bcc5492fef49_story.html).

<sup>592</sup> Ahmet Erdi Ozturk, "Islam and Foreign Policy: Turkey's Ambivalent Religious Soft Power in the Authoritarian Turn," *Religions* 12, no. 38 (January 2021): 13.

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Islam within Turkey and in the Turkish diaspora.<sup>593</sup> Diyanet oversees at least 90,000 mosques worldwide with the aid of at least 140,000 staff including state-hired imams, preachers, and muftis.<sup>594</sup> Erdoğan's control over the organization granted him Islamic authenticity and authority, and he used it to justify many of his controversial policies. For example, as early as the 2013 coup, Erdoğan began blaming the Gülen Movement (GM) for nearly every crisis that materialized in Turkey, be it economic, political, or terrorist related. After 2016, the Diyanet under Erdoğan's grip began issuing *fatwah's* supporting these claims.<sup>595</sup> The GM grew to represent a global cabal made up of Gülenists, the West, terrorists, Israelis, and any other foreign entity that voiced opposition to Erdoğan.<sup>596</sup> The UAE, for example, was accused of inciting the 2016 coup when tensions were high in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.<sup>597</sup> Most importantly, the Diyanet proclaims "the AKP is the last stronghold and living representative of the ummah," and that anyone plotting against Erdoğan or his party is plotting against Turkey, Islam, and humanity itself.<sup>598</sup>

*Delegitimizing Non-Islamic, Undemocratic Dictators and Monarchies*

President Erdoğan delegitimizes non-Islamic leaders like Mahmoud Abbas and undemocratic monarchs like Egypt's Sisi and Saudi Arabia's MbS. Though more recent events like the U.S. declaration on Jerusalem in 2017 have brought Erdoğan and Abbas closer together,

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<sup>593</sup> Farouk and Brown, "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything," <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/saudi-arabia-s-religious-reforms-are-touching-nothing-but-changing-everything-pub-84650>.

<sup>594</sup> Ihsan Yilmaz and Ismail Albayrak, "Religion as an Authoritarian Securitization and Violence Legitimization Tool: The Erdoğanist Diyanet's Framing of Religious Movement as an Existential Threat," *Religions* 12, no. 574 (July 2021): 2.

<sup>595</sup> Yilmaz and Albayrak, "Religion as an Authoritarian Securitization and Violence Legitimization Tool," 4.

<sup>596</sup> Yilmaz and Albayrak, "Religion as an Authoritarian Securitization and Violence Legitimization Tool," 9.

<sup>597</sup> Gorvett, "Turkey's Arabian Nights," 36.

<sup>598</sup> Yilmaz and Albayrak, "Religion as an Authoritarian Securitization and Violence Legitimization Tool," 10-12.

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Erdoğan and the AKP have frequently referred to President Abbas as the “head of an illegitimate government” since the 2006 Hamas victory.<sup>599</sup> Erdoğan has an advantage on the Palestinian issue that the Arab monarchies do not—the willingness to lend support to Hamas, the growingly popular symbol of Palestinian resistance. Scholars Ely Karmon and Michael Barak wrote that the AKP’s pro-Hamas stance has persuaded young Turks to view the Palestinian issue through a “good Hamas versus evil Israel” lens.<sup>600</sup> King Salman has long been perceived as the champion of the Palestinian issue and shares a close relationship with Abbas.<sup>601</sup> If Palestinian support for Hamas grows in the next decade, Turkey may usurp Saudi Arabia’s status as champion of the Palestinian issue and protector of the third holiest mosque (Jerusalem).

Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi has endured Erdoğan’s constant defamatory and delegitimizing claims since seizing power in the 2013 coup. The 2016 attempted coup in Turkey resurfaced Erdoğan’s negative feelings toward Sisi, whom Erdoğan called a “putschist president” who kills thousands of his own people.<sup>602</sup> In 2019, the Turkish president further condemned Sisi after the executions of nine men convicted of murdering the Egyptian prosecutor general in 2015. Erdoğan responded to the executions by stating, “Of course, we are going to be told that it is a decision of the judiciary, but there, justice, elections, all that, are nonsense. There is an authoritarian system, even totalitarian ....”<sup>603</sup> The bitter relationship between Turkey’s and Egypt’s leaders that began in 2013 continues to prevent the normalization of ties between the two countries nearly a decade later.<sup>604</sup>

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<sup>599</sup> Karmon and Barak, “Erdoğan’s Turkey and the Palestinian Issue,” 76, 78.

<sup>600</sup> Karmon and Barak, “Erdoğan’s Turkey and the Palestinian Issue,” 76.

<sup>601</sup> “Saudi King Reiterates Support for Palestinians After Israel Comments,” *Reuters*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-saudi/saudi-king-reiterates-support-for-palestinians-after-israel-comments-idUSKCN1HA19H>.

<sup>602</sup> “Erdogan Blasts Egypt’s ‘Putschist President’ Sisi in al-Jazeera Interview,” *New Arab*, July 22, 2016, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/erdogan-blasts-egypts-putschist-president-sisi-al-jazeera-interview>.

<sup>603</sup> “Turkish President Erdogan Denounces Egypt’s Sisi Over Executions,” *Al-Jazeera*, February 24, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/24/turkish-president-erdogan-denounces-egypts-sisi-over-executions>.

<sup>604</sup> “Turkey, Egypt Normalization Vital for East Med: FM Çavuşoğlu,” *Daily Sabah*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-egypt-normalization-vital-for-east-med-fm-cavusoglu>.

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In 2018, the Saudi-sanctioned killing of Khashoggi conveniently gave Erdoğan a talking piece where he could manipulate the media his government largely controls to present himself as a truth-teller and to boost Turkey's international reputation.<sup>605</sup> The Turkish president undermined his regional rival, MbS, in the process. The Washington Post journalist Kareem Fahim wrote that Erdoğan intentionally omitted MbS' name in his televised speech following the murder, and instead addressed King Salman directly. By revealing only small details of the murder over the course of weeks, Ankara attempted to squeeze concessions out of Riyadh and prolong MbS' negative media coverage.<sup>606</sup> Less discreetly, Erdoğan wrote in his op-ed for the Washington Post that he was confident the hit on Khashoggi originated "from the highest levels of the Saudi government," but that "[he did] not believe for a second that King Salman, the custodian of the holy mosques, ordered the hit ...."<sup>607</sup> In other words, Erdoğan implicated MbS for the murder without explicitly saying his name.

*Saudi Regime Security Strategies that Compete with Turkey*

Like Turkish foreign policy under the AKP, Saudi foreign policy "is largely determined by domestic concerns" according to Ennis and Momani.<sup>608</sup> Ennis and Momani further elaborated on this concept in 2013:

In order to maintain its domestic legitimacy, Saudi Arabia leverages oil rent, its family leadership tradition, the 'manipulation of a cultural ideal related to leadership', its

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<sup>605</sup> Harlan, "Erdogan Stood Up for Khashoggi," [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/erdogan-stood-up-for-khashoggi--while-turkey-jails-more-journalists-than-any-other-country/2018/10/24/a47250d6-d6fb-11e8-8384-bcc5492fef49\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/erdogan-stood-up-for-khashoggi--while-turkey-jails-more-journalists-than-any-other-country/2018/10/24/a47250d6-d6fb-11e8-8384-bcc5492fef49_story.html).

<sup>606</sup> Kareem Fahim, "After Khashoggi's Killing, Turkey's Leader Seeks to Weaken Saudi Arabia's Powerful Crown Prince," *Washington Post*, October 23, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/after-khashoggis-death-turkeys-leader-seeks-to-weaken-saudi-arabias-powerful-crown-prince/2018/10/23/4f0ffeec-d6d1-11e8-8384-bcc5492fef49\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/after-khashoggis-death-turkeys-leader-seeks-to-weaken-saudi-arabias-powerful-crown-prince/2018/10/23/4f0ffeec-d6d1-11e8-8384-bcc5492fef49_story.html).

<sup>607</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdogan, "Recep Tayyip Erdogan: Saudi Arabia Still has Many Questions to Answer About Jamal Khashoggi's Killing," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2018. [news/global-opinions/wp/2018/11/02/recep-tayyip-erdogan-saudi-arabia-still-has-many-questions-to-answer-about-jamal-khashoggis-killing/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/11/02/recep-tayyip-erdogan-saudi-arabia-still-has-many-questions-to-answer-about-jamal-khashoggis-killing/).

<sup>608</sup> Ennis and Momani, "Shaping the Middle East in the Midst of the Arab Uprisings," 1131.

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importance as the custodian of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina with a concomitant association of religious guardianship, and its championing of Islamic and Arab causes.<sup>609</sup>

So long as the old social contract of the rentier state holds, the Saudi regime has been free to export a modified version of its rentier model and ultra-conservative religious ideology abroad. The Saudi royal family invests in authoritarian regimes that support Saudi interests (as seen in Arab Spring) and has enjoyed *de facto* leadership of Sunni Islam for decades. By touting its status as Custodian of the Holy Mosques, flexing its economic prowess as the only Arab country permanently represented in the G20, and being a prominent member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Arab League, the kingdom's Islamic leadership (among Sunnis at least) has largely gone unquestioned.<sup>610</sup> That is, of course, until Turkey turned towards the Middle East with its neo-Ottoman aspirations.

Turkey's neo-Ottomanism and its inherent rival claim to lead the Muslim world has not gone unnoticed by Saudi Arabia. In response, the kingdom villainized Erdoğan's government for its loose military cooperation with Iran in places like Syria and Iraq, targeting Kurdish nationalists who pose a threat to the regimes in both Ankara and Tehran.<sup>611</sup> These cooperative agreements led MbS to include Turkey in his "triangle of evil" in March 2018, in company with Iran and Daesh.<sup>612</sup> This categorization of Turkey is in line with the Saudi autocracy's *takfiri* rhetoric used to brandish Iran and certain sectarian groups as the "Other" as discussed in chapter three. To strain Turkey economically, Saudi Arabia and the UAE imposed an informal ban on Turkish imports in 2020, causing Turkey to drop from the thirteenth country by imports in Saudi Arabia to seventy-sixth.<sup>613</sup>

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<sup>609</sup> Ennis and Momani, "Shaping the Middle East in the Midst of the Arab Uprisings," 1132.

<sup>610</sup> Ennis and Momani, "Shaping the Middle East in the Midst of the Arab Uprisings," 1128.

<sup>611</sup> Gorvett, "Turkey's Arabian Nights," 36.

<sup>612</sup> "Saudi Crown Prince Says Turkey Part of 'Triangle of Evil': Egyptian Media," *Reuters*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-turkey-idUSKCN1GJ1WW>; See also Ryan Crocker et al., "Saudi Arabian-Turkish Rivalry in the Middle East," *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 15.

<sup>613</sup> "Saudi Imports From Turkey Hit Fresh Record Low Amid Informal Boycott," *Reuters*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/value-saudi-imports-turkey-drops-further-january-2021-03-25/>.

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The kingdom outpaces Turkey in religious outreach and economic aid to Muslim communities, but Wahhabi proselytism has slowed under MbS. Unlike his predecessors, MbS downplays the important historical relationship between the Saudi royal family and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.<sup>614</sup> This is in stark contrast to President Erdoğan's objectives to connect with Turkey's Ottoman sultans and past. While the crown prince is trying to shed the kingdom's reputation in the West as a backward country, Erdoğan and his party seek to re-create an imagined Ottoman past to retrieve Turkey's religious credentials and convince regional states of their once shared civilization.

No single country or government has held the religious authority to rule the Muslim world since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the form of a revived caliphate, but Riyadh and Ankara (and others for that matter, such as Tehran) do claim a type of moral authority. Turkey's Islamic democracy model was (until recent years) acclaimed by the international community and inspired Islamic political movements in MENA, but the type of Islamic jurisprudence espoused by Turkish state-sponsored clerics is not widely practiced in the Arab world, and the Turkish state does not have the financial reach of the Saudis.<sup>615</sup> Ankara needs religious authority to expand its soft power. Riyadh needs to diversify its economy and appear to make political and social reforms to fortify Saudi's leadership title outside the conservative Wahhabi clerical establishment.

MbS' religious reforms and break from Saudi conservative Wahhabism may tangentially be informed by Turkey's rising religious soft power and the UAE's popular, comparatively moderate implementation of Islam. Where the AKP took a secular government and made it Islamist over the course of two decades, MbS effectively eliminated the shared power agreement between the royal family and the clerical elite in a matter of a few years. MbS' reforms primarily sought to consolidate power and manage dissent within the conservative religious community, but the crown prince's interest in mirroring the popular social model of the UAE and perhaps the

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<sup>614</sup> Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'," <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>.

<sup>615</sup> Monte Palmer, *The Future of the Middle East: Faith, Force, and Finance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 136.

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successful economic modernization of Turkey may have also informed his contentious reforms.<sup>616</sup>

Despite MbS' reforms, Saudi Arabia remains committed to defending its leadership title. In the Balkans, Turkey and Saudi Arabia compete for Bulgarian Muslims' allegiance by offering rival mosque building projects, trained clerics, and developmental aid.<sup>617</sup> Bulgaria is of importance to both Turkey and Saudi Arabia for its membership in the EU.<sup>618</sup> Turkish scholars Ismail Telci and Aydzhan Peneva echo the AKP propaganda that Turkey's intentions in Bulgaria (or anywhere else) is purely motivated by a desire to "preserve [ethnic Turks'] cultural and religious identities" who have "suffered from the exclusionist policies of the Bulgarian regimes for many years."<sup>619</sup> They further argue that Saudi's "main purpose" is to "spread the Wahhabi ideology to this part of the Balkans," an ideology that promotes radicalization according to the authors.<sup>620</sup> Apart from their inherently Turkish perspective, Telci and Peneva push the overly simplistic stereotype of Saudi Wahhabism. The present Wahhabi-Salafist ideology preaches a quietist loyalty to the state's ruler (*wali al-amr*), which is a form of regime security.<sup>621</sup> Outside of the Balkans, Riyadh mirrors much of what it is doing in Bulgaria, such as donating two grand mosques to Pakistan modeled after the Grand Mosques in Mecca and Medina.<sup>622</sup>

Finally, the crown prince is likely more concerned about Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman rhetoric influencing the Saudi youth population than he is concerned about religious leadership, per se.

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<sup>616</sup> Stephane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia and the Limits of Religious Reform," *Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (June 2019): 98.

<sup>617</sup> Ismail Numan Telci and Aydzhan Yordanova Peneva, "Turkey and Saudi Arabia as Theo-political Actors in the Balkans: The Case of Bulgaria," *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 2 (2019): 238, 241-242.

<sup>618</sup> Telci and Peneva, "Turkey and Saudi Arabia as Theo-political Actors in the Balkans," 239.

<sup>619</sup> Telci and Peneva, "Turkey and Saudi Arabia as Theo-political Actors in the Balkans," 242.

<sup>620</sup> Telci and Peneva, "Turkey and Saudi Arabia as Theo-political Actors in the Balkans," 242.

<sup>621</sup> Farouk and Brown, "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything," <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/saudi-arabia-s-religious-reforms-are-touching-nothing-but-changing-everything-pub-84650>.

<sup>622</sup> Ramadan Al Sherbini, "Saudi Arabia Builds Two Mosques in Pakistan as Gifts," *Gulf News*, November 16, 2021, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/saudi-arabia-builds-two-mosques-in-pakistan-as-gifts-1.83733065>.

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The two countries have the same religious complexities but in reverse. In Turkey, Erdoğan took an intentionally (and constitutionally) secular state and fought the Republican elite to install his own “authoritarian strand of Islamist populism.”<sup>623</sup> His opponents—secular Turks—embrace Westernization and view the Ottoman past as backward.<sup>624</sup> In Saudi Arabia, MbS took a highly conservative state founded on *Sharia* and completely neutered religious authorities that might oppose his more secular or modern reforms. By implementing reforms popular with the Saudi youth, MbS may preemptively be eclipsing Erdoğan’s appeal in the kingdom.

### **Turkish-Saudi Rapprochement**

Second, Erdoğan’s and MbS’ rapprochement is shaped by economic benefits for Turkey, and regime security benefits for the Saudis. Turkey’s failing economic policies, reliance on energy imports, and the war in Ukraine has forced Erdoğan to seek new investments in Turkey’s struggling economy. Unfortunately for Erdoğan, Turkey’s involvement in the Arab Spring, support for Islamists, and alliance with Qatar have isolated Turkey from the Gulf. The burden lies mostly on Erdoğan to repair relations with the Gulf monarchies to save Turkey’s spiraling economy. Coincidentally, MbS is likely shopping for advanced arms and a capable security provider given MbS’ frosty relationship with Washington. The Gulf has the money; Turkey has the markets and second-largest military in NATO.<sup>625</sup>

#### *Turkey’s Struggling Economy*

Turkey’s once-burgeoning economy under the AKP has rapidly declined in recent years due to many of the same economic circumstances that Turkey faced twenty years ago: government corruption, cronyism, rampant inflation, and austere measures by the government to

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<sup>623</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 180-181.

<sup>624</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 180-181.

<sup>625</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu, “Mapping the Turkish Military’s Expanding Footprint,” *Washington Post*, August 31, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/energy/mapping-the-turkish-militarys-expanding-footprint/2020/08/28/0ac8a114-e8e3-11ea-bf44-0d31c85838a5\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/energy/mapping-the-turkish-militarys-expanding-footprint/2020/08/28/0ac8a114-e8e3-11ea-bf44-0d31c85838a5_story.html).

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combat inflation.<sup>626</sup> President Erdoğan and the AKP lifted Turkey out of the 2001 economic crisis by implementing long-overdue banking and healthcare reforms, investing in industrial markets and public services, accelerating urbanization, and rapidly creating millions of jobs to sustain a growing labor force.<sup>627</sup> In the twenty years that followed and especially after 2013, Erdoğan's increasingly centralized economic policies largely benefited only the government elite and the AKP's support base.<sup>628</sup>

As part of its populist governing style, the AKP rewarded its base supporters with jobs, public resources, and state funds, but dissident Turkish citizens often did not enjoy such benefits.<sup>629</sup> The 2013 Gezi Park protests were one such example, with Turkish citizens protesting Erdoğan's government for its mega-projects that benefited only loyal supporters of the government elite, according to Akcan.<sup>630</sup> Conversely, the ruler-citizen social contract in the rich Gulf states offsets most demands for political and social change in Saudi Arabia, as discussed in previous chapters. With far less financial stability and 50 million more people (voters) to please than Saudi Arabia, the AKP and Erdoğan remain vulnerable to domestic economic and political pressures that are seen less frequently in the Gulf.

Turkey's reliance on imported energy resources puts the country at an additional disadvantage. According to the International Trade Administration, Turkey spends over \$40 billion annually to import oil, natural gas, and coal from Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Algeria, Nigeria, Qatar, and the United States.<sup>631</sup> The World Bank reported that the Turkish "economy's high energy and carbon intensity make it vulnerable to global energy supply and price volatility

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<sup>626</sup> Jonathan, Gorratt, "Two Decades in Office, Erdogan's AKP Comes Full Circle." *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 41, no. 2 (March 2022): 50-51.

<sup>627</sup> World Bank, *Turkey's Transitions: Integration, Inclusion, Institutions* (Washington, D.C.: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, 2014), 6-14.

<sup>628</sup> Gorratt, "Two Decades in Office, Erdogan's AKP Comes Full Circle," 50-51.

<sup>629</sup> Yilmaz and Bashirov, "The AKP After 15 Years," 1819.

<sup>630</sup> Akcan, "The 'Occupy' Turn in the Global City Paradigm," 371.

<sup>631</sup> International Trade Administration, "Energy Resource Guide: Turkey – Oil and Gas," U.S. Department of Commerce, accessed June 8, 2022, <https://www.trade.gov/energy-resource-guide-turkey-oil-and-gas>.

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and pose a challenge to Turkey's exporters in the context of global and regional decarbonization policies."<sup>632</sup> In the country's pursuit of more affordable and sustainable energy, Turkey has overreached in the energy-rich Mediterranean Sea, putting Turkey at odds with Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel. The latter four countries excluded Turkey from their strategic partnership, known as the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, to maximize exploitation of the Mediterranean's new-found gas fields and simultaneously shut out Turkey.<sup>633</sup> Adding insult to injury, Saudi Arabia and the UAE participated in joint military exercises with Greece in 2020 showing their support for one of Turkey's long-time adversaries.<sup>634</sup>

The Republic of Turkey's economy has spiraled in recent years, and the quartet monarchies know it. Erdoğan's 2019 quid pro quo with the GNA in Libya—which promised Turkish military support in exchange for a maritime delimitation agreement that would have benefited Turkey economically—was effectively nullified by Egypt's and Greece's demarcation agreement in 2020.<sup>635</sup> Despite Turkey's aggressive energy exploration, *Reuters* reported that "Turkish energy imports surged 134.1% year-on-year to \$7.75 billion in April [2022] ...."<sup>636</sup>

Now with a greater military presence throughout the MENA region, the lira depreciating to record lows in 2021, inflation at a 23-year record high (73 percent in June 2022), and the

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<sup>632</sup> World Bank, "Turkey Overview," April 19, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkey/overview#1>.

<sup>633</sup> Nicholas Danforth, "A Mediterranean Duel: Erdogan, Sisi, and the Fate of Egyptian-Turkish Relations," *Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2021; Marc Espanol, "Egypt's Gas Imports from Israel Hit All-time High," *Al-monitor*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/2022/06/egypts-gas-imports-israel-hit-all-time-high>.

<sup>634</sup> Steven A. Cook, "Why Turkey Is Resetting Relations With Saudi Arabia," *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/why-turkey-resetting-relations-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>635</sup> Saied, "Egypt Supports Cyprus Against Turkey," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/egypt-supports-cyprus-against-turkey>.

<sup>636</sup> "Turkish Energy Imports Jump 134% to \$7.75 bln in April – Ministry," *Reuters*, May 5, 2022, [https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-energy-imports-jump-134-775-bln-april-ministry-2022-05-05/#:~:text=ISTANBUL%2C%20May%205%20\(Reuters\),was%20%246.1%20billion%20in%20April](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-energy-imports-jump-134-775-bln-april-ministry-2022-05-05/#:~:text=ISTANBUL%2C%20May%205%20(Reuters),was%20%246.1%20billion%20in%20April).

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Russia-Ukraine War affecting energy imports, Turkey is stretched beyond its limits.<sup>637</sup>

Erdoğan's unorthodox decision to lower interest rates (five times) in an attempt to lower inflation has further "worsened macro-financial conditions and dented investor confidence" according to the World Bank.<sup>638</sup> Turkey has few options left for economic recovery. These economic hardships likely explain Erdoğan's seemingly sudden change of heart towards the Gulf monarchies. Erdoğan needs Gulf energy, markets, and investments.<sup>639</sup>

### *Turkey's Appealing Military Footprint*

Though Saudi Arabia has an economic edge in this cold war, it lags behind Turkey's military prowess. Saudi Arabia and Turkey differ in their approaches to national defense. Saudi Arabia for decades has enjoyed the protection of the United States and other international partners that rely on Gulf oil. Turkey has a mixed relationship with security alliances. Erdoğan broke away from Atatürk's "Peace at Home, Peace in the World" mantra and substituted it for the AKP's "strategic depth" doctrine.<sup>640</sup> To this point, Cagaptay wrote the following:

Erdoğan has rejected the idea of tying Turkey to great powers while working toward his goal. He has instead moved to cast Turkey as an autarchic power wielding influence over its neighbors, occasionally rejecting traditional Western partners, and seeking new relationships with Russia, Iran, and China.<sup>641</sup>

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<sup>637</sup> Daniel Markind, "Political Tensions Rise Over Rights to Mediterranean Natural Gas Bonanza," *Forbes*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danielmarkind/2020/02/07/will-natural-gas-tensions-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-lead-to-armed-conflict/?sh=4b966c0a34c7>; World Bank, "Turkey Overview," <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkey/overview#1>; Natasha Turak, "Turkey's Inflation Soars to 73%, a 23-year High, as Food and Energy Costs Skyrocket," *CNBC*, June 3, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/03/turkeys-inflations-soars-to-73percent-as-food-and-energy-costs-skyrocket.html>.

<sup>638</sup> World Bank, "Turkey Overview: Economy," April 19, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkey/overview#1>.

<sup>639</sup> H.A. Hellyer and Ziya Meral, "Will the Page Turn on Turkish-Egyptian Relations?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 19, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/03/19/will-page-turn-on-turkish-egyptian-relations-pub-84124>.

<sup>640</sup> Cagaptay, "Making Turkey Great Again," 173-174.

<sup>641</sup> Cagaptay, "Making Turkey Great Again," 175.

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Ankara's neo-Ottoman vision flips the strategic defense-partnership paradigm. Now less interested in relying on global superpowers for protection, Ankara seeks to become MENA's peace broker and Islamic military leader to undermine Saudi influence.

However, Riyadh's fixations on the proxy war with Iran, the Yemen war, and the U.S. military withdrawal from MENA incentivizes Saudi Arabia to turn to Turkey as a regional security partner and arms exporter.<sup>642</sup> Former president Trump imposed sanctions on Turkey's Presidency of Defense Industries in 2020 for its purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system, and President Biden halted some U.S. weapons exports to Saudi Arabia in 2021.<sup>643</sup> In response to these sanctions, Turkey heavily invested in its defense industry and is rapidly becoming one of the world's top weapon's exporters.<sup>644</sup> Saudi Arabia's crown prince is likely in the market for a new arms dealer, given that the Emirates and the U.S. are distancing themselves from the war in Yemen and MbS appears hesitant to overtly normalize relations with Israel. The Russian invasion of Ukraine also complicates arms trade deals with Russia.

In exchange for badly needed investments and energy resources from the Gulf, Erdoğan may consider joining the Saudi-led bloc against Iran. Though mostly antagonistic towards Iran, Turkey's poor relations with the Arab monarchies and Israel have prevented a united, strategic counter-offensive. Turkey has seriously degraded Iran's influence in Iraq and Syria by using its military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities, whereas the Sunni Arab states and Israel have struggled to reverse Iran's entrenchment in Lebanon and Yemen.<sup>645</sup> With the exception of Qatar,

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<sup>642</sup> Tastekin, "Saudi Crown Prince Balances Turkey Visit with Stops in Greece and Cyprus," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/saudi-crown-prince-balances-turkey-visit-stops-greece-and-cyprus>; Fulya Ozerkan and Remi Banet, "Saudi Crown Prince to Visit Turkey in First Since Khashoggi Murder," *Al-Monitor*, June 17, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/saudi-prince-visit-turkey-first-khashoggi-murder>.

<sup>643</sup> Amanda Macias, "U.S. Sanction Turkey Over Purchase of Russian S-400 Missile System," *CNBC*, December 14, 2020, <https://www.cnb.com/2020/12/14/us-sanctions-turkey-over-russian-s400.html>; Michael Crowley and Edward Wong, "U.S. Is Expected to Approve Some Arms Sales to U.A.E. and Saudis," *New York Times*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/14/us/politics/arms-sales-uae-saudi-arabia.html>.

<sup>644</sup> Benjamin Brimelow, "Turkey is Building New Ships, Tanks, and Missiles to Boost Its Military and Send a message to the Rest of NATO," *Business Insider*, August 6, 2021, <https://businessinsider.com/turkey-is-modernizing-its-military-to-send-message-to-nato-2021-8>.

<sup>645</sup> Nasr, "All Against All," <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-12-02/iran-middle-east-all-against-all>.

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Erdoğan's foreign policy decisions in the Middle East, in the Eastern Mediterranean, and towards NATO, have left Turkey friendless.<sup>646</sup> If the Saudis and the UAE decided that the Iranian threat superseded their ideological differences with Qatar and Turkey, there is a scenario in which Turkey's base in Qatar could become the central hub for a joint military deterrence against Iran. However, given the stark rivalry between Erdoğan and MbS and the unresolved enmity between Qatar and its neighboring regimes, it is unlikely that such a scenario would develop in the next ten years.

*Gulf Reception to Turkey's Extended Hand*

On the surface, MbS, MbZ, and even Sisi appear to be open to normalizing relations with Turkey, albeit with conditions. President Erdoğan made his rounds to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in April 2022 and sent the Turkish Minister of Treasury and Finance Nureddin Nebati to Cairo in June 2022.<sup>647</sup> MbS reciprocated by visiting Ankara in June 2022 after making pit stops in Cairo and Amman.<sup>648</sup> In preparation for the trip, Riyadh lifted the travel ban that prohibited Saudi citizens from traveling to Turkey and ended its unofficial embargo on Turkish goods a few months prior.<sup>649</sup> MbZ was first to mend ties with Turkey back in December 2021, investing \$10-20 billion into Turkey's energy, infrastructure, and finance sectors.<sup>650</sup> Sisi is dealing with his own country's economic crisis as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war. While several Gulf states

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<sup>646</sup> Cagaptay, "Making Turkey Great Again," 175.

<sup>647</sup> Fraser, "Turkey, UAE Sign Cooperation Agreements as They Mend Ties," <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/turkey-hosts-emirati-crown-prince-seek-mend-ties-81367002>; Tastekin, "Can Ankara-Riyadh Rapprochement Help Improve Turkey-Egypt Ties?," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/can-ankara-riyadh-rapprochement-help-improve-turkey-egypt-ties>; Rasha Mahmoud, "Turkey Inches Closer to Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, May 24, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/turkey-inches-closer-egypt>.

<sup>648</sup> Colm Quinn, "Erdogan Hosts MBS in Ankara," *Foreign Policy*, June 22, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/22/erdogan-turkey-saudi-mohammed-bin-salman/>.

<sup>649</sup> Vivian Nereim, "Saudi Arabia Lifts Ban on Travel to Turkey Ahead of Prince Visit," *Bloomberg*, June 20, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-20/saudi-arabia-lifts-ban-on-travel-to-turkey-ahead-of-prince-visit>; Quinn, "Erdogan Hosts MBS in Ankara," <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/22/erdogan-turkey-saudi-mohammed-bin-salman/>.

<sup>650</sup> Hamdullah Baycar, "Rapprochement Spree: Abu Dhabi Recalibrates Relations with Ankara," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 16, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/86025>.

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(Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar) have pledged \$22 billion in investments, Egypt likely would welcome Turkish investments and increased bilateral trade.<sup>651</sup>

The Gulf monarchies likely have additional, if not ulterior, motives for reengaging with Turkey. Saudi Arabia, for example, was surpassed by Russia as China's top oil supplier as of June 2022 (due to Russia's current heavily discounted prices), incentivizing MbS to broaden relations with oil-dependent states.<sup>652</sup> Turkey is an excellent choice for its strategic location between the Middle East and Europe, and already is a major hub for the transshipment of oil and natural gas. The UAE for its part may be seeking to undercut its small-state rival Qatar, which invests heavily in Turkey's banking and real estate sectors.<sup>653</sup> No matter the reasons for rapprochement, Turkey's dependency on the Gulf to potentially bail out the state's economy will likely leave Erdoğan or his successor beholden to the region's long-time economic and political hegemons.

### **After Erdoğan: The Death of Neo-Ottomanism?**

The cold war for leadership of the Muslim world between Turkey and Saudi Arabia relies heavily on the personalities of each country's respective leadership. For example, Turkey remained largely secular in its politics and oriented towards the West prior to the rise of the AKP in 2001. As this chapter has shown, the AKP and Erdoğan then reoriented Turkey towards the East and Islamized Turkish politics to enlarge Turkey's role in regional and global politics. Had Turkey remained under Kemalist political culture, it is not likely that a cold war between these two Sunni states would have commenced. In Saudi Arabia, the possibility of leadership turnover occurs less often due to its autocratic, *Sharia*-based governing model and is therefore slightly more predictable. Neo-Ottomanism will likely survive for many years regardless of Erdoğan's or

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<sup>651</sup> Azza Guergues, "Egypt to Sell State-Owned Firms Amid Economic Crisis," *Al-Monitor*, May 25, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/egypt-sell-state-owned-firms-amid-economic-crisis>.

<sup>652</sup> Chen Aizhu, "China May Oil Imports from Russia Soar to a Record, Surpass Top Supplier Saudi," *Reuters*, June 20, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/chinas-may-oil-imports-russia-soar-55-record-surpass-saudi-supply-2022-06-20/>; Quinn, "Erdoğan Hosts MBS in Ankara," <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/22/erdogan-turkey-saudi-mohammed-bin-salman/>.

<sup>653</sup> Baycar, "Rapprochement Spree: Abu Dhabi Recalibrates Relations with Ankara," <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/86025>.

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the AKP's removal from power due to Erdoğan's successful integration of the neo-Ottoman ideology and the hope it promises Turkey's conservative masses.

*Post Erdoğan/AKP Neo-Ottomanism*

One should not assume that President Erdoğan will remain in power indefinitely (however resilient he has proven to be), or that he will continue his destructive policies that have clashed with the quartet regimes and have brought financial ruin upon Turkey. Indeed, most of Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman policies have not panned out for Turkey and have isolated the country. Yavuz explained the overall reception of Erdoğan's neo-Ottomanism regionally this way:

Most of the Balkan states, along with the Arab states, have negative images of the Ottomans. They either have ignored or vilified this legacy as the cause of their economic and political backwardness as well as ongoing ethnic conflicts such as the legitimacy issue of Kosovo, Bosnia, and Macedonia; Kurdish secessionism; and the sociopolitical conflict in Lebanon. The Ottoman, for these respective nationalist historians, signifies occupation, captivity, social and economic backwardness, Islamic hegemony, and the "other" of their national identity.<sup>654</sup>

The AKP failed to sympathize with these negative memories, preferring instead to promote an imagined "golden age" of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>655</sup> As a result, Turkey is left with only Qatar as an ally, and Erdoğan is left with limited choices: rapprochement or consolidating power further. He has opted for both.

*Rescue Erdoğan? MbS' Choices*

Saudi Arabia has at least two choices when it comes to rescuing Erdoğan. First, MbS and the Gulf monarchies could temporarily stall their economic and diplomatic talks with Turkey to weaken President Erdoğan's chances of winning the Turkish presidential election in 2023. President Erdoğan's foreign policy is driven by his domestic political strength, which is closely tied to his (and the AKP's) ability to deliver "robust economic growth" according to

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<sup>654</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 206.

<sup>655</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 209.

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Cagaptay.<sup>656</sup> Turkey's foreign policies significantly disrupted the quartet regimes' interests during the Arab Spring and the Qatar blockade, which lie at the root of today's poor relations between the monarchies and Turkey. If Erdoğan's foreign policy decisions are contingent on his domestic political strength, it would seem counterintuitive for the Gulf to bail Erdoğan and his party out financially. After twenty years of consolidating power and gradually seizing near-total control of Turkey's financial system, Erdoğan may have got more than he bargained for.<sup>657</sup> His status as the defender of the poor and reputation as Turkey's economic savior may not be enough to attract voters in 2023 if he cannot bring down inflation and consumer prices. If the Gulf monarchies perceive that ousting Erdoğan is in their best interests, letting Turkey crash and burn economically may be the solution.

MbS' second choice is to seize this opportunity to normalize relations with Turkey regardless of who might be in power, or perhaps even anticipating that Erdoğan will soon leave the political scene, and it is therefore in Saudi Arabia's best interests to influence the transition. Saudi Arabia wages a bigger cold war with Iran, and MbS is handicapped in his ability to normalize relations with the region's other military powerhouse, Israel.<sup>658</sup> Normalizing relations with Turkey could be viewed as more of a victory lap for MbS, as opposed to a capitulation to the West and Israel (which have pressured the kingdom to normalize relations with the Jewish state for decades).<sup>659</sup> Though perhaps not as politically or economically isolated as Turkey, Saudi Arabia too appears to be looking for new friends amid the kingdom's uncertain

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<sup>656</sup> Cagaptay, "Making Turkey Great Again," 175-176.

<sup>657</sup> Kareem Fahim, "As Turkey's Economy Struggles, Erdogan Goes it Alone," *Washington Post*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/21/erdogan-turkey-economy-inflation/>.

<sup>658</sup> Mustafa Fetouri, "For How Long Can Saudi Arabia Remain the Virtual Signatory of the Abraham Accords?," *Middle East Monitor*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220407-for-how-long-can-saudi-arabia-remain-the-virtual-signatory-of-the-abraham-accords/>; Jacob Magid, "Blinken: Saudi Arabia is a 'Critical Partner' in Expanding Abraham Accords," *Times of Israel*, June 3, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/blinken-saudi-arabia-is-a-critical-partner-in-expanding-abraham-accords/>.

<sup>659</sup> Fetouri, "For How Long Can Saudi Arabia Remain the Virtual Signatory of the Abraham Accords?," <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220407-for-how-long-can-saudi-arabia-remain-the-virtual-signatory-of-the-abraham-accords/>.

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relationship with Washington.<sup>660</sup> This second option is more likely than the first, supported by MbS' decision to visit Ankara, end Saudi Arabia's travel ban to Turkey, and increase Turkish imports into the kingdom.<sup>661</sup> MbS may be dually rewarded for his rapprochement with Turkey if Erdoğan's opposition ousts the AKP's champion for him.

*Erdoğan's Domestic Opposition and the Durability of Neo-Ottomanism*

As of June 2022, a coalition of six opposition parties has united to oust Erdoğan in the 2023 election, promising to reverse many of Erdoğan's perceived authoritarian policies. Some of these reversals include reestablishing the parliamentary system that Erdoğan dissolved in 2017; implementing a one-time, seven-year presidential term limit "without the possibility of re-election;" liberalizing the press; and requiring parliamentary approval to initiate a state of emergency.<sup>662</sup> The coalition further openly accused Erdoğan of authoritarianism which is "fueling corruption and allowing him to rule by decree, dictate monetary policy, control the courts, and jail tens of thousands of political opponents."<sup>663</sup> Some notable opponents in the coalition include former AKP members Ahmet Davutoğlu (Erdoğan's former prime minister) and Ali Babacan, though neither are realistic presidential candidates.<sup>664</sup> But for the first time in

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<sup>660</sup> Mead Gruver, "Saudi Ambassador to US Shrugs Off Biden, Sanders Criticism," *Associated Press*, March 6, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-bernie-sanders-jamal-khashoggi-wyoming-elections-a0e0a347f9f3dea498a150381d27547d>; Aamer Madhani, Zeke Miller, and Ellen Knickmeyer, "Biden to Visit 'Pariah' Saudi Arabia and Israel Next Month," *Associated Press*, June 14, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-business-israel-saudi-arabia-jamal-khashoggi-edba0435dedc08db952c406536d67713>.

<sup>661</sup> Nereim, "Saudi Arabia Lifts Ban on Travel to Turkey Ahead of Prince Visit," <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-20/saudi-arabia-lifts-ban-on-travel-to-turkey-ahead-of-prince-visit>; Quinn, "Erdogan Hosts MBS in Ankara," <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/22/erdogan-turkey-saudi-mohammed-bin-salman/>.

<sup>662</sup> Nazlan Ertan, "Turkey's Opposition Unites in Advance of 2023 Elections," *Al-Monitor*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/turkeys-opposition-unites-advance-2023-elections>.

<sup>663</sup> Carlotta Gall, "Turkish Opposition Begins Joining Ranks Against Erdogan," *New York Times*, October 23, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/23/world/middleeast/turkey-election-erdogan-opposition.html>.

<sup>664</sup> Gall, "Turkish Opposition Begins Joining Ranks Against Erdogan," <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/23/world/middleeast/turkey-election-erdogan-opposition.html>.

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several years, respondents from a recent poll predicted that Erdoğan would lose the next election.<sup>665</sup>

No matter the outcome of the 2023 elections, Erdoğan's and the AKP's entrenched neo-Ottomanism is unlikely to dissipate from Turkish politics for years to come. Yavuz's analysis of the Turkish reception of neo-Ottomanism supports this argument. He wrote the following in his book *Nostalgia for the Empire*:

Although Erdogan's days in power are numbered, Turkey's nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire and desire to become a regional power will remain the major objectives of Turkey's conservative masses. The ghost of the empire has permeated the vision and hopes of Turkey deeply enough to transcend the political portfolio of any ruling Turkish government, regardless of its partisan bearings.<sup>666</sup>

Neo-Ottomanism as a principle resonates with the conservative Muslim majority in Turkey even if many reject or resist Erdoğan's authoritarian rule. Many Turks found solace in Erdoğan's leadership for years because he could deliver economic prosperity and security.<sup>667</sup>

The 2023 presidential election marks an important year for Turkey. It marks the "100-year anniversary of the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire and allied occupation after World War I," the New York Times reported.<sup>668</sup> Perhaps Erdoğan's greatest success during his twenty years of political dominance was his revival of Turkish nationalism and re-defining of what it means to be a Turk. For Erdoğan, a Turk shows a "commitment to Islam and the Ottoman heritage to protect and perpetuate the faith with the goal of maintaining social integration and restoring the greatness of the Ottoman Turks," according to Yavuz.<sup>669</sup> The AKP rescued Turkey twenty years ago from economic ruin and elevated Turkey's status to that of a regional power for many years. The conservative Muslim masses in Turkey

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<sup>665</sup> Gall, "Turkish Opposition Begins Joining Ranks Against Erdogan," <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/23/world/middleeast/turkey-election-erdogan-opposition.html>.

<sup>666</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 202.

<sup>667</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 155.

<sup>668</sup> Gall, "Turkish Opposition Begins Joining Ranks Against Erdogan," <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/23/world/middleeast/turkey-election-erdogan-opposition.html>.

<sup>669</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 157.

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likely still believe in this vision, though they may look to another presidential candidate or party to lift Turkey out of its current economic crisis and international isolation.

Without a doubt, President Erdoğan is the most influential leader of Turkey since Atatürk.<sup>670</sup> Turkey was always important to world powers and organizations for its strategic location, whether serving as a buffer between Europe and the Soviet Union or as the EU's sixth-largest trading partner.<sup>671</sup> Under Erdoğan, however, Turkey attracted the positive attention of some countries and communities (Qatar, Tunisia, Russia, and the MB), but drew the ire of many others (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, NATO, and the EU).<sup>672</sup> The Arab quartet under Saudi leadership has mounted a multi-faceted counter-attack to respond to Turkey's rising soft and hard power, as shown in this chapter and the chapter previous. In the cold war for leadership of the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia now must compete with not just its arch-enemy Iran, but with the internationally-integrated and popular Islamic democracy of Turkey.

**Estimate**

In the most likely scenario—with Erdoğan no longer in power by 2030—the cold war for leadership of the Muslim world between Turkey and Saudi Arabia will cool, but likely not disappear altogether. The conservative Turkish population enjoyed religious freedom for nearly twenty years under the AKP, something they did not have before Erdoğan's rule. In those twenty years, Erdoğan convinced many of them of Turkey's glorious Ottoman past, encouraged them to embrace their Islamic culture, and export that vision to other formerly Ottoman countries. While a reversal of Erdoğan's authoritarian, Islamic governing model is possible under cooperative leadership, those sentiments of greatness and belonging are unlikely to dissipate before 2030. As

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<sup>670</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 145.

<sup>671</sup> Sehar Azhar Dar, "EU-Turkey Relations: Erdogan's Policies and Consequences on Turkish Economy," *Journal of European Studies* 37, no. 2 (2021): 84, 89.

<sup>672</sup> "Is Turkey More Trouble to NATO Than it is Worth?," *Economist*, June 16, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/06/16/is-turkey-more-trouble-to-nato-than-its-worth>; "The Fiction That Turkey is a Candidate to Join the EU is Unravelling," *Economist*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2021/08/26/the-fiction-that-turkey-is-a-candidate-to-join-the-eu-is-unraveling>.

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a result, this cold war may emulate the infrequently hot Arab-Israeli cold war: flaring up in times of religious revival and agitation, but otherwise stagnant.

*Rivalry Cools Without Erdoğan*

As the previous section argued, it is hard to imagine that Recep Erdoğan will still be in power in 2030. His economic policies prior to consolidating power in 2017 transformed Turkey into the number one developing economy in the world by 2018.<sup>673</sup> As a result of his deep paranoia and the thirst for power, however, Erdoğan assumed ownership of virtually all Turkish institutions making him squarely responsible for many of Turkey's domestic and international woes. The economic crisis has eroded Erdoğan's reputation and cost him his heretofore reliable voting base.<sup>674</sup> The challenge for the opposing coalition will be producing an economic plan that can rescue Turkey from its current crisis while simultaneously selecting a candidate that can win over the undecided conservative voters who historically supported the AKP.<sup>675</sup>

If Erdoğan manages to secure yet another five years as Turkey's ruler, he will likely continue executing his neo-Ottoman policies with some modifications. By now, Erdoğan likely understands that he needs at least some near-peer economies to trade with, not just countries to influence and rule over. His rapprochement with the Gulf monarchies is the most convincing indicator of this realization. By seeking foreign investments from his political foes and capitulating to some of the quartet's demands regarding the MB, Erdoğan likely hopes this will buy him some goodwill from the region's most wealthy autocrats.

A Saudi-Turkey thaw would be mutually beneficial. As Dr. Bülent Aras noted in a 2018 *Middle East Policy Council* conference, the "Saudis can play a role in putting an end to the Turkish-Egyptian rift," and "Turkey can provide a counterbalancing role in Syria, Iraq and

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<sup>673</sup> Dar, "EU-Turkey Relations: Erdogan's Policies and Consequences on Turkish Economy," 83.

<sup>674</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu, "Turkey's Erdogan Is Losing Support Where He Can Least Afford It," *Bloomberg*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-17/turkey-2023-presidential-election-anger-over-prices-threatens-erdogan>.

<sup>675</sup> Ertan, "Turkey's Opposition Unites in Advance of 2023 Elections," <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/turkeys-opposition-unites-advance-2023-elections>.

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Lebanon.”<sup>676</sup> Turkey’s military capability remains an attractive option for MbS, as the crown prince continues to be concerned by Iran’s regional influence. However, full reconciliation with Saudi Arabia is more likely under new Turkish leadership. Erdoğan may be willing to execute a last-ditch effort to save Turkey’s economy, but it is not in Riyadh’s interest to rescue the Turkish president from his domestic opposition in the context of this cold war. Rapprochement with Turkey can likely be achieved without Erdoğan, and perhaps Erdoğan’s ouster would even expedite the reconciliatory process. Neo-Ottomanism will endure, but Erdoğan’s “Sultan” status would disappear and thereby likely strengthen Saudi Arabia’s status as leader of the Muslim World under MbS.

*Intersectionality with Other Middle East Cold Wars*

The fate of this cold war is intertwined with the three cold wars previously discussed. On the Palestinian issue, Turkey is one of the very few countries to overtly support Hamas in its *jihad* against Israel, which has strengthened Turkey’s image as a defender of oppressed Muslims. Similarly, Turkish support for political Islamist movements and the MB remains an obstacle to full normalization of ties with the Gulf monarchies. Turkey’s rapprochement with the Gulf monarchies could eventually force Erdoğan or Turkey’s future leadership to reconsider its relationship with the MB offshoot and the MB in general. MB members in both Egypt and Turkey sense or fear this outcome.<sup>677</sup> If the Turkish leadership abandoned its support of either Hamas or political Islamists, it would be giving up much of Turkey’s religious soft power and influence over the Muslim world.

The trajectory of the meta geopolitical conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran has major implications for the future of the Saudi-Turkish rivalry. As discussed in the chapter three estimate, Saudi Arabia and Iran’s antithetical and intractable Islamic governing models almost certainly prohibit those two countries’ reconciliation. Turkey’s Islamic governing model (though not originally designed as such) rivals the Saudi Arabian model too, but MbS likely views the Iranian regime as threat number one based on decades of violent proxy warfare and Iran’s pursuit

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<sup>676</sup> Crocker et al., “Saudi Arabian-Turkish Rivalry in the Middle East,” 16.

<sup>677</sup> Fehim Tastekin, “Muslim Brotherhood Exiles in Turkey Face Uncertain Future,” *Al-Monitor*, November 10, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/11/muslim-brotherhood-exiles-turkey-face-uncertain-future>.

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of a nuclear bomb. MbS is likely willing to overlook Turkey's rising status as leader of the *umma* if Turkey is willing to join the Saudi-led bloc against Iran. Iran does something similar in its cold war with Saudi Arabia by propping up non-Shia militia groups like Hamas to aid in the Iranian regime's separate cold war with Israel. A Turkish-led, Gulf-funded military united against Iran and its proxies could diffuse the cold war for leadership of Islam between Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

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**CHAPTER 6****CONCLUSION**

Four overarching cold wars plague the broader Middle East region, intersect with each another, and function as the foundation for future Middle Eastern and North African geopolitical struggle into 2030. First, growing Palestinian support for Hamas, the humanitarian disaster in Gaza, waning trust in the PA, and the Gulf monarchies' fatigue of the Palestinian issue intensify the Arab-Israeli conflict and point toward sustained or heightened conflict into 2030. Second, Saudi Arabia and Iran's battle for primacy in the Middle East is fueled by their antithetical Islamic governing models, violent delegitimization rhetoric, arms race, and respective economic circumstances. Their irreconcilable differences protract the existing proxy wars in Syria and Yemen and increase the likelihood of direct conflict. Third, conflicting goals between political Islamists, their state sponsors Turkey and Qatar, and the authoritarian monarchies further entrenched the MENA region in authoritarianism after the Arab Spring subsided, potentially resetting the clock for renewed uprising and geopolitical conflict through 2030. Fourth, Turkey's emerging role as the leader of the Muslim world directly challenges Saudi Arabia's hegemony, adding an additional layer of complexity to the three other cold wars.

This chapter will first provide a high-level summary of each cold war and their trajectories into 2030, followed by new strategic insights that emerged after conducting this holistic analysis. Finally, an opportunity for further research will be presented that builds upon the findings of this study.

*Chapter Two: The Arab-Israeli Cold War*

The outlook for the longest contemporary cold war between Israel and the Arab world looks bleak for the Palestinians in 2030, especially for those living in Gaza. The Palestinian issue was placed lower on the priority list of the signatories of the Abraham Accords in 2020 and even by the traditional champion of the Palestinian cause—Saudi Arabia. MbS appears to be sidelining the Palestinian issue in favor of a semi-covert, strategic military partnership with Israel to combat Iranian aggression. In the meantime, Hamas' popularity among Palestinians continues to grow with each conflict, as trust in the PA wanes amid delayed elections and worsening conditions for Gazans. Iran, Turkey, and Qatar continue to prop up Hamas for their own

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interests, like seeking the destruction of Israel with the aid of Hizballah (Iran), challenging Saudi religious leadership (Turkey), and maintaining its status as a special patron of Islamists (Qatar). Finally, the return of former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to power would likely deepen Palestinian grievance, as Netanyahu's far-Right policies have degraded the possibility of a two-state solution for fifteen years.

*Chapter Three: The Saudi-Iran Meta Conflict*

The Saudi and Iranian regimes' mutual hatred of each other, rival Islamic governing models, delegitimization of the other using violent *takfiri* rhetoric, and hastening arms race point toward protracted or new proxy wars in 2030. Iran's failure to resurrect the JCPOA over Tehran's insistence that the IRGC's terrorist label must be removed and IAEA inspections become less frequent has left Iran economically and politically disadvantaged in its cold war with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia will reap most of the benefits of the energy-price windfall resulting from the Russia-Ukraine war, and thus be better positioned to continue bankrolling loyal authoritarian governments in the Middle East and North Africa. But where Saudi Arabia is strong financially, it lags behind Iran's superior fighting force. The two countries likely will pursue allies that can make up for their respective deficiencies. Iran could deepen its military relationship with Russia over their shared perceived ostracism from the West, while Saudi Arabia may explore a closer security relationship with Israel and Turkey.

*Chapter Four: Political Islamism and the Monarchies*

Political Islamism will persist through 2030, as it is a religion based on belief strands that have scriptural and prophetic precedence. The cold war is further intensified by the simultaneous repression of these movements by the Gulf monarchies and state sponsorship of political Islamism by Turkey and Qatar. The Arab Spring demonstrated to Islamists (and the Gulf monarchies) that it was possible to overthrow a repressive regime under the right circumstances and with the necessary outside help. However, the failure of the Arab Spring's two strongest movements (Ennahda and the MB) due to their poor governance likely lessened the appeal of such movements. Ennahda is threatened with exclusion from Tunisian President Saied's proposed New Republic, and the members of the MB remain in Egyptian prisons or exile. In

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addition to passing laws that made it easier to prosecute suspected Islamists, the quartet regimes launched a political and economic war on Turkey and Qatar for their involvement in the uprisings and continual support for political Islamist movements. After ten years of hostility, the Gulf monarchies, Turkey, and Qatar have taken steps towards rapprochement out of economic and national security interest, though the major ideological differences remain.

*Chapter Five: Turkey's Bid for Leadership of the Muslim World*

Turkey's emergence as a rival to Saudi Arabia for leadership of the Muslim world adds a layer of complexity to the three other Middle Eastern cold wars. Primarily under President Erdoğan's leadership, the AKP's uninterrupted twenty-year rule has transitioned Turkey's Western-leaning political culture into an Islamic, neo-Ottoman one. In his self-appointed role as the new "Sultan," Erdoğan has launched a campaign to revive Turkey's imagined "Golden Age" under the Ottoman Empire. To do this, he pursues an aggressive foreign policy, consolidates political and religious power at home, and delegitimizes the non-Islamic or undemocratic monarchies in the Gulf. These policies, intertwined with expansive mosque-building and neo-Ottoman renovation projects designed to benefit Erdoğan's cronies within the AKP, have led Turkey down a path of financial ruin.<sup>678</sup> With few options, Erdoğan has turned to the Gulf seeking foreign investments and energy to bail out Turkey's spiraling economy. Erdoğan likely hopes that rapprochement with the Gulf will steady Turkey's economy and win votes in Turkey's upcoming 2023 elections. No matter the result of the election, the AKP's long tenure has likely insured the durability of neo-Ottoman fervor among the conservative masses.

**New Strategic Insights**

At least two additional strategic insights or trends emerged in conducting this holistic analysis of the four major cold wars. The first trend is the reemergence or strengthened position of authoritarianism in the MENA region despite a decade of civil wars and protests that began with the Arab Spring. This exacerbates the conflict between political Islam and the state regimes. The second trend is the emergence of non-Arab regional partners like Israel and Turkey joining

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<sup>678</sup> Gorvett, "Two Decades in Office, Erdogan's AKP Comes Full Circle," 50-51; Akcan, "The 'Occupy' Turn in the Global City Paradigm," 372-374.

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the Saudi-led bloc united against Iran, versus the increasingly anti-West bloc composed of Iran, Russia, and China. The next several sections broadly analyze these insights and their importance.

*Authoritarian Entrenchment in MENA*

Emerging or strengthened authoritarianism trends throughout the four cold wars, laying the groundwork for another potential uprising that could surpass the demonstrations that began in 2010. In addition to the traditional authoritarian governments of the Gulf states—and those propped up by the Gulf states—constitutionally democratic governments like Turkey’s, Tunisia’s (post-2011), and Palestine’s may become future casualties of the struggle between political Islamists and the monarchies. Each of these countries fight separate cold wars, but their leaders reflect similar authoritarian behaviors that could incite domestic protest among their impoverished and politically marginalized communities.

*Erdoğan and Saied: Achieving Opposite Goals by the Same Authoritarian Means*

President Erdoğan of Turkey and President Saied of Tunisia are examples of two democratically elected leaders that centralized authority to marginalize political opposition within their government (among other reasons). For Erdoğan, this began as early as 2001 when the AKP rose to power and began a systematic un-structuring of the secular government that suppressed Muslim religious expression for many years. After the 2013 and 2016 coups in Turkey, Erdoğan seized control of Turkey’s military, press, banks, and religious institutions using emergency powers. In 2017, those powers aided in dissolving the parliamentary system. Today, President Erdoğan leads an Islamized, insular government with an Islamic clerical body that emphasizes loyalty to the ruler.<sup>679</sup> In many ways, Erdoğan’s government nearly resembles that of Saudi Arabia’s, wherein the clerical establishment legitimizes the royal family’s right to rule.

Tunisian President Saied similarly used emergency powers and ruled by decree to marginalize the Muslim Democrats (formerly known as the Ennahda Movement), who have been

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<sup>679</sup> Yilmaz and Bashirov, “The AKP After 15 Years,” 1823; Dogan, “Analyzing the Institution of Caliphate in the Context of Political Islamists,” 117.

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a part of every governing coalition in Tunisia since 2012.<sup>680</sup> A decade later, Ennahda still had considerable influence in Tunisia's parliament before Saied dissolved parliament in May 2022. Saied appears to pursue a goal opposite of Erdoğan's: reversing Ennahda's Islamic influence on Tunisia's democratic transition. Like Erdoğan, Saied eliminated or seized the institutions that threatened his grip on power. Saied's and Erdoğan's unilateral political, economic, and religious decisions have launched economic crises and civil unrest in both countries.

*An Arab Spring in Palestine?*

Simultaneous distrust in Mahmoud Abbas' indefinite rule and popular support for Hamas—an Islamic political movement and party—heightens the likelihood of political uprising in Palestine. Abbas' four-year term that began in 2005 has now lasted seventeen years, without an election held since.<sup>681</sup> Though certainly operating under different circumstances than both Turkey and Tunisia, the PA and Abbas specifically are accused of corruption, cronyism, and abuse of power. Abbas' decision to postpone the 2021 elections added fuel to the fire, especially as Hamas' popularity has increased in recent years and could potentially unseat Abbas in an election. If Abbas denies Hamas and the suffering Gazans an opportunity for change through political elections, Hamas and its supports could choose a more violent tactic to remove Abbas and the PA from power. Israel would certainly intercede in such a scenario, but so might Hamas' state sponsors: Iran, Turkey. And Qatar.

*Authoritarianism's Broader Effect on MENA*

Authoritarianism has long been a norm in MENA, but its further entrenchment creates new or renewed problem sets for the troubled region. Do stronger regimes automatically benefit Saudi Arabia in its war with Iran? Or does Turkey's strengthened status weaken the Saudi autocracy by redistributing the bipolarity of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran? Will Turkey

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<sup>680</sup> David Siddhartha Patel, "The Tunisian Public and the Rise of Kais Saied: A conversation with Hind Ahmed Zaki," *Crown Center for Middle East Studies*, <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/crown-conversations/cc-13.html>.

<sup>681</sup> Aaron Reich, "On This Day in 2005: Mahmoud Abbas Elected Palestinian Authority," *Jerusalem Post*, January 9, 2022. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-691984>.

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become a third major regional power like that of Saddam Hussein's Iraq? Coalitions in both Turkey and Tunisia promise to reverse the damage caused by Erdoğan's and Saied's authoritarian policies. If these coalitions fail, will their respective marginalized groups revolt? Outside factors like food shortages, water scarcity, mass migration, and geopolitical struggles further complicate the ruler-citizen social contract typically found in authoritarian states. As authoritarianism, inevitable corruption, and social angst increase, political uprising and revolt tend to follow. Iran tends to thrive in these kinds of chaotic environments and illustrates the next trend.

*The Unavoidable Rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran*

The MENA region's innumerable political and economic issues seem to inevitably, if only tangentially, be affected by the Saudi-Iran meta conflict. Chapter three explored Saudi Arabia's and Iran's competing religious and political ideologies as well as their stark economic and military differences. The Arab Spring provided the ultimate venue in which to test their different models and assets, connecting the Saudi-Iran cold war with the cold war between political Islam and the monarchies. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict provides Iran with a dual opportunity to aggravate Israel via its support of Hamas and Hizballah while also challenging Saudi Arabia for custodianship of Jerusalem. And finally, Turkey's bid for leadership of Islam breaks the traditional binary power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran by adding a third contender. Resultingly, MbS and Khamenei have had to adapt to the ever-changing operating environment of the three other cold wars.

MbS appears to prioritize the cold war with Iran above all others, evidenced by his willingness to forgive old foes like President Erdoğan and seek new partnerships with historical enemies like Israel in pursuit of military strength. Turkey's involvement in the Arab Spring and Erdoğan's scathing public remarks towards MbS following the Khashoggi murder were effectively left in the past with MbS' visit to Ankara in June 2022. The literature review annotated Jones' and Guzansky's described "tacit security regime" that exists between Saudi Arabia and Israel used to combat Iran's expanding umbrella of influence. MbS likely hopes to

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co-opt Turkey's and Israel's military superiority into the Saudi-led bloc united against Iran, which currently is composed of the Gulf monarchies.

Turkey's successful integration into the Saudi-led alliance would mark a significant evolution of the Saudi-Iran meta conflict for at least two reasons. First, Saudi Arabia would gain a military advantage over Iran with access to "the most powerful army in the Islamic world."<sup>682</sup> Second, Turkey's involvement might allow the U.S. to continue reducing its military footprint in the Middle East and therefore allow the U.S. to avoid being caught in crosshairs of a future Saudi-Iran war. Monte Palmer, author of *The Future of the Middle East: Faith, Force, and Finance*, argued that Turkish military forces have an advantage over U.S. forces in their ability to fight Islamic extremism "without precipitating images of a new crusade."<sup>683</sup> If the U.S. and Israel refrained from engaging directly in a theoretical ground war between the Saudi-bloc and Iran-bloc, two of Khomeini's revolutionary pillars (anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism) are removed.

Iran could never buy traditional allies like Saudi Arabia does, but it wields a more capable fighting force. Iran instead relies on its proxies and looks to anti-Western powers like Russia and China to keep the Iranian regime economically afloat. The Russia-Ukraine war could strengthen Russia-Iran relations, evidenced by Russia's instance during the JCPOA re-negotiations that Ukraine-war sanctions would not affect Russia's current trade partnership with Iran. While the outcome of the war in Eastern Europe—and subsequently Russia's future international standing—are unknown, Moscow's and Tehran's shared hatred of the West and isolation are likely to bring the two countries closer together. China continues to balance the Saudi-Iran rivalry by purchasing oil from, and conducting military exercises with, both countries. It is not within Beijing's interests to pick a side in the conflict. However, a stronger Saudi alliance that includes Israel (a Western power), Turkey (a NATO ally), and perhaps a renewed security partnership with the U.S. might push China to side more closely with the anti-Western bloc of Iran and Russia.

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<sup>682</sup> Palmer, *The Future of the Middle East*, 159.

<sup>683</sup> Palmer, *The Future of the Middle East*, 159.

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**Opportunities for Future Research: The Fifth Cold War**

There is an important, broader cold war taking place globally that has profound implications and consequences for the MENA region: the strategic power competition between the United States, Russia, and China. Russia's and China's growing presence in the Middle East exponentially complicates the already deteriorating conditions in the MENA region and adds an additional layer of complexity to the four cold wars addressed in this thesis. Oil politics certainly play a significant role in this proposed fifth cold war, but energy is only one factor among many that invites the presence of world powers; the prospect of new markets for their regime cronies drives this economy-centric geopolitical struggle for more market share. Russia has also become a dominant player on the Middle Eastern stage politically and militarily. Like China, Russia has no interest in "picking sides" in the several cold wars, but rather wishes to be seen as a neutral power broker capable of filling the political vacuum left in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Middle East generally.

Strategic power moves like the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and China's intrusive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in MENA introduce new complexities and questions to the existing four cold wars in the region. What conditions would force Russia or China to pick a side in the Saudi-Iran cold war? Will political Islamism reach new heights in mass surveillance states like Saudi Arabia or the UAE, which soon will adopt China's intrusive digital infrastructure? What will become of the Middle East if traditional U.S.-partners like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or Egypt decide that China is a more reliable partner than the U.S.? These kinds of questions, and many more, could be incorporated into a broader investigation that answers the question, "How has the strategic power competition—between the United States, Russia, and China—affected the major geopolitical conflicts, or cold wars, in the MENA region, and how will the strategic power competition influence these conflicts through the next ten years?"

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*Final Thoughts*

The outcomes of many concurrent events like Israeli and Tunisian elections in 2022, Turkish elections in 2023, the Russia-Ukraine war, climate change, President Biden's visit to the Middle East, China's BRI initiative, and innumerable other factors could all help, hinder, or otherwise alter the status of each cold war analyzed in this thesis. These events, however, lie on the surface of much deeper and unresolved structural problems that are often ignored or misunderstood by the broader international community. Peace in the MENA region certainly cannot be obtained in the next ten years, but tailoring policies to address some of the deeper structural factors affecting the four geopolitical conflicts addressed in this thesis could create positive change in the region. Palmer's words sum up this argument:

Recall that a tragedy is a predictable disaster that the actors in the drama lack the will to stop. And so it is with the drama of peace in the Middle East and the world beyond. How could it be otherwise? The United States wants to be great (again). Russia wants to be great (again). China wants to be great (again). ... Israel and Turkey want to be pure again. The Islamic extremists want Islam to be pure again. ... And so the story goes and goes and goes. ... Faith, be it religious faith, nationalism, or dreams of charismatic power, is not to be denied. Neither is the human lust for power, wealth, security, and spiritual ties to God. How well they blend together.<sup>684</sup>

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<sup>684</sup> Palmer, *The Future of the Middle East*, 181.

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